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Old world order cannot be restored with old photographs: *Top security official*

2



Agricultural sector grows 2.3% despite wartime pressures, minister says

3



AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup:

Iran hammers Vietnam to march into last eight

6



Iran proposes SCO network to preserve historical manuscripts

8

Strait of Hormuz will remain closed until US accepts Iran's conditions: *FM*



Vessels pass through the Strait of Hormuz in this photo published by the Islamic Republic News Agency on November 22, 2026.
IRNA

US accusations of dirty bomb threat part of securitization strategy

TERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

With its campaign against Iran at an impasse, Washington is seeking to manage the crisis while keeping its options open. International affairs analyst Mani Mehrabi told Iran Daily that the United States has opted to combine military and economic pressure with continued diplomatic engagement. He also argued that allegations of Iran pursuing a "dirty bomb" or chemical and biological weapons should be viewed through the lens of "securitization," a strategy aimed at portraying Iran as an immediate security threat to justify potential future actions.



Mani Mehrabi

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

IRAN DAILY: Given Donald Trump's recent remarks on Iran, including his reference to new developments with the start of the New Year, as well as statements by other US officials, what do you see as Washington's next move toward Tehran? Do the signs point more toward an escalation of pressure or an attempt to open the door to negotiations?

MEHRABI: US policy toward Iran cannot be reduced to the simple binary of "war or negotiations." Donald Trump's recent remarks point to a tactical balancing act between maximum pressure, military deterrence and limited diplomatic openings, rather than a clear-cut shift toward either peace or full-scale war.

In this regard, two important issues must be distinguished when assessing Washington's recent actions: its desire to bring the current costly situation to an end and its desire to end the confrontation with Iran. These are not necessarily the same thing. The White House may seek to reduce the costs and manage the ongoing attrition without necessarily abandoning the broader confrontation or relinquishing its leverage over Tehran.

The Trump administration faces domestic constraints and cost-benefit calculations. On the one hand, the repercussions of the midterm elections and a possible shift in the balance of power in Congress in the New Year are narrowing the White House's window of opportunity. On the other, the economic costs of war, its impact on energy markets and its adverse effects on the Republicans' political standing are raising the price of entering a wider conflict. Meanwhile, the experience of regional confrontations has shown that military superiority does not necessarily translate into the ability to impose desired political outcomes.

This is why Washington has opted for a combination of military and economic pressure while keeping diplomatic channels open, rather than pursuing an all-out war. On the one hand, military warnings, claims of control and a naval blockade, as well as Israel's insistence on a more aggressive approach amid concerns over Iran rebuilding its military capabilities, indicate that the military option remains on the table. On the other, consultations between Trump's special envoys and Qatari officials in Berlin, efforts to advance proposals for reopening the Strait of Hormuz, and Trump's stated interest in a grand bargain all suggest that the diplomatic track has not been closed.

Nevertheless, given the considerable gap between Washington's demands and Tehran's red lines, keeping this channel open does not mean that the United States is prepared to settle for limited or temporary understandings. Under the current circumstances, diplomacy should instead be viewed alongside military and economic pressure, primarily as a tool for sending messages and gauging the other side's position.

The recent meeting between Donald Trump's envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, and Qatar's prime minister and special representative in Berlin has once again highlighted Doha's role in mediating between Tehran and Washington. Does Qatar have sufficient leverage to bring the two sides closer and break the current deadlock?

The meeting should be seen as a sign of Washington's efforts to keep diplomatic channels active, as mentioned earlier. At the same time, it reflects regional countries' concerns about the possibility of another confrontation between the United States and Iran. Given its relations with both sides, diplomatic experience and effective communication channels, Qatar can relay messages and help lay the groundwork for indirect negotiations. However, Doha's ability to facilitate dialogue does not mean it has the leverage needed to resolve fundamental disagreements. On the one hand, Tehran is insisting on a complete lifting of the naval blockade, the removal of sanctions and the release of its frozen assets. On the other, Washington wants the nuclear issue to be included in the negotiations. Therefore, unless both sides demonstrate the political will to moderate their positions and move toward a common framework, Qatar's diplomatic capacity alone will not be enough to break the current deadlock. Rather than offering a way to resolve the differences between the two countries, its mediation efforts primarily reflect regional states' concerns about being caught up in the fallout from the confrontation between Washington and Tehran.

How should recent accusations about the possibility of Iran using dirty bombs be analyzed in terms of their political and security objectives?

Claims that Iran may be seeking to develop a "dirty bomb" or chemical and biological weapons — allegations firmly rejected by the Islamic Republic of Iran and compared to earlier narratives used to justify the war — can be analyzed on several political, security and psychological levels:

First, psychological operations and the battle of narratives: Although a "dirty bomb" is fundamentally different from a nuclear weapon, the term immediately evokes fears of radiation and insecurity in urban areas in the public mind. Raising the issue in the media can be used to heighten public concern and put pressure on the other side.

Second, justifying hostile and security-related measures: In foreign and security policy discourse, attributing unconventional threats or banned weapons to a country can create a ready-made pretext for intelligence operations, intensified security pressure or new military actions, before public opinion and allies begin to question the need for further intervention.

Third, exploiting domestic and alliance dynamics: For an administration facing domestic criticism over the costs of war while also consulting with allies such as Israel over the level and pace of pressure, highlighting new "existential or security threats" can serve as a tool for consolidating domestic support and keeping partners aligned.

From a strategic perspective, this issue can be analyzed within the framework of the concept of "securitization." Securitization occurs when an issue is taken beyond the realm of political disagreement and presented as an immediate and exceptional threat to national security. Under such circumstances, governments can invoke the need to counter that threat to justify their own actions.

See page 3