

# The MED SCOPE

## The Middle East Desk

IDSF \ Research Division

### The Muscat Maneuver: Iran's Silent War Across the Negotiation Table

April 23, 2025

This paper was produced by The Middle East Desk at the Research Division of IDSF.

Eran Lahav - Head of the Middle East Desk  
Giovanni Giacalone - Researcher at the Middle East Desk  
Avishai Karo - Researcher at the Middle East Desk

Under the professional supervision of:  
Or Yissachar - VP for Research and Content  
Itay Medina - Director of Research

This briefing conducted by the IDSF Research Department  
For further inquiries please contact: [elie@idsf.org.il](mailto:elie@idsf.org.il)

# The MED SCOPE

## The Muscat Maneuver: Iran's Silent War Across the Negotiation Table

### Preface

This paper, *U.S-Iran Talks in Oman: Negotiation Developments*, explores the recent secret discussions between Tehran and Washington through the lens of three critical perspectives: the Iranian regime, Iranian diplomats and the broader Arab world. While the White House and Omani mediators describe the Muscat talks as “constructive,” deeper analysis reveals a highly asymmetrical perception of the negotiations across different audiences and strategic interests.

The diverging narratives underscore the complexity of the nuclear Oman talks - not merely as a negotiation over the nuclear program itself uranium and sanctions, but as a multidimensional chessboard involving identity, power, and long-term regional influence.

---

### Key Takeaways from the Iranian Perspective:

#### The Iranian Regime:

- Views time-wasting as a strategic tool to erode American leverage under the Trump administration.
- Insists on sanctions relief as a prerequisite to advancing negotiations.
- Drags out talks while rebuilding the “Axis of Resistance” and reinforcing its regional proxies.
- Sells the image to its domestic audience: “We are leading, not following.”
- Portrays the talks as a psychological victory - even without tangible outcomes.
- Reinforces Khamenei's authority by framing the talks as sanctioned by him, aligning the national narrative with the Supreme Leader.

#### The regime's equation:

Prolonged talks = Time gained + Economic empowerment (via sanctions relief) + Strengthening of the Axis of Resistance and proxy forces

**Labels the “victory narrative” as a media ploy that masks internal and external pressures.**

**Key point:** Iran is running a clock - not negotiations. Every minute that passes brings it closer to full sanctions relief, and every word uttered in the talks is merely smoke to obscure that clock.

This Highlights the regime's duplicity:

- ✓ **Internally** - signals strength and unwavering positions.
- ✓ **Externally** - projects openness to dialogue.

**Internally:**

## **Diplomacy or Deception? The Real Stakes of the U.S - Iran Dialogue**

### **“Let’s not be overly optimistic”**

In a sermon to government leaders, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei waved off the talks in Oman as “one of the dozens of tasks the Foreign Ministry is doing”, and that one should not be “overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic” about them. “It may come to a conclusion, it may not. Let’s see,” he added. This neutral, poker-face tone had one caveat, though: Khamenei warned that Iran has “red lines”, and that “the mistakes we made in the JCPOA [the 2015 Nuclear Deal] should not be repeated.” Namely, rather than being restrained by the ongoing talks, the country should continue to function and advance at all levels.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi continued this cool-headed line, saying on April 21 that “Iran is ready to negotiate with the US based on mutual respect and equal status,” focusing on sanctions and the nuclear file. This is a stark pivot from Iran’s previous hardened position vis-à-vis the Trump administration, that publicly opposed any negotiation with the US, quoting the then-targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani and saying that Iran “will not negotiate with bullies.”

### **Dictating the narrative**

The initial round of high-stakes talks between the U.S. and Iran in Muscat, Oman’s capital, focused on Tehran’s nuclear program. The follow-up meeting took place last Saturday in Rome. Both parties are attempting to project a sense of satisfaction following the dialogue. In what appears to be a tiny bit of optimism in the Iranian media, a consistent narrative of “victory” is being projected by regime mouthpieces.

From Tehran’s vantage point, the Islamic regime and its affiliated media outlets are portraying a narrative in which Iran emerged from the talks in a position of strength.

In fact, crafting the narrative seems to be playing an increasingly central role in Iran’s part. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei held a press briefing in which he accused Israel of sabotaging the talks, in an apparent attempt to create daylight between Israel and the US: “A coalition seems to be forming to disrupt and derail the diplomatic process ... the Zionist regime [Israel] is at the center of this effort.” In an elaborate editorial, regime mouthpiece *Tehran Times* rejected outright the “Libyan Model” that Israel has purportedly presented to the US and explained why it is unfeasible.

A spokeswoman for the Iranian government, Fatemeh Mohajerani, confirmed this on April 22, saying that “many media outlets took their news from our media as a news source.”

Iranian opposition media Iran International portrayed this as an attempt by the Iranian government to “manage” the news and attempted to present the “first narrative”.

Kayhan, a hardline newspaper managed by representatives of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, dismissed former President Trump’s threats of military action against Iran’s nuclear facilities as “illusory,” warning that any such strike would trigger retaliation against Israel. While downplaying the significance of the talks in Oman, Kayhan declared Iran “the victor” of the negotiations.

This narrative of Iranian “victory” was amplified following public protests in Tehran just a day before the negotiations began, where demonstrators burned American flags and held up placards urging Iran to “wake up” from the 2015 nuclear agreement:

*“We gained nothing from the nuclear deal, The people are not fools.” “Do not negotiate with the murderer of dear Haj Qassem (Soleimani) - the only dialogue is revenge.” “We’ll sign another nuclear deal - and they’ll tear it apart again.”*

This narrative was further echoed by senior regime figures and commentators. Mohammad Hossein Ranjbaran, a senior adviser to Foreign Minister Araghchi and political analyst, stated: “Whether the negotiations fail, continue, or yield results... the victory belongs to the people and the Islamic Republic.”

The Iranian state media follows the regime’s official line, presenting the very occurrence of the talks as a “strategic triumph.” Simply put, every round of dialogue gives Tehran exactly what it wants: time-Time to stall, reset the narrative, and steer the talks at its own pace.

The hardline daily Javan, affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), declared: “Iran is the victor in the negotiations - with or without an agreement.” The newspaper described the Muscat meeting as a “display of Iranian power in the face of American helplessness.” It highlighted the breakthrough in talks and the promise of future negotiations as signs that the process ultimately favors Iran. According to Javan, Iran dictated all the preconditions - including the location, timing, and agenda.

The regime’s media apparatus employs visual tools like political cartoons to reinforce the illusion of control among the public. Such cartoons serve as cognitive weapons - they convey unspoken messages not voiced in official discourse. However, they also underscore the disconnect between the regime’s “official” media narrative and the grim realities on the ground: Iran currently finds itself in a weakened position following the collapse of its “Axis of Resistance” and faces an uncompromising U.S. administration. Meanwhile, the Iranian economy continues to suffer under

the weight of international sanctions. The regime's only perceived way out is to achieve nuclear capability in order to establish deterrence against Israel and other Middle Eastern powers.

To this end, Iran is deliberately buying time, dragging negotiations forward at its own pace to wear down U.S. resolve and outlast the Trump administration. Tehran is keen to prolong nuclear talks while rebuilding its regional proxies, especially Hezbollah. For Iran, the strategy is clear: **slow down now to accelerate later.**

### Externally:

#### The diplomatic perspective of the Iranian regime:

In the past two weeks, the Iranian embassies in the West have been sharing the regime propaganda concerning the nuclear talks taking place in Oman and Italy.

Careful monitoring of various Iranian embassy X accounts in Western Europe and Latin America has highlighted a slightly different narrative based on the target audience, albeit with a focus on presenting the idea that the Iranian regime is aiming for a peace perspective with the desire to find an agreement on nuclear power.

Aggressive content against the United States, posted between April 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, ceased from April 19<sup>th</sup> onwards, as the narrative transitioned towards a more restrained rhetoric that nevertheless showed extreme caution and some distrust towards the United States. Words of praise were instead spent on Oman, the mediator of the negotiations, and Italy, presented as a long-standing partner of the regime.

The slight rhetorical change throughout the days and according to geographical context showed more aggressiveness coming from the account of the Iranian embassy in Bolivia.

On April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025, the latter criticized the US bombings of the Houthis in Yemen:

“Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei described the US military attacks against Yemen and the violation of Yemen's territorial sovereignty as a clear threat to international peace and security.”

On the same day, the embassy also accused US special envoy, Steven Witkoff, of sabotaging the negotiations through contradictory statements:

“Contradictions in statements by US envoy Steve Wittkoff have drawn criticism from Tehran, which warns of the risk of sabotaging the dialogue.”

Two days later, on April 18<sup>th</sup> (the day before the meeting in Rome), the Iranian embassy in the UK posted a long and harsh post, by the spokesperson of the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Esmaeil Baqaei, attacking the U.S. for the bombings in Yemen, accusing Washington of “aggressive



April 15 – Javan's Daily Cartoon  
[Source: JavanOnline.ir](http://Source: JavanOnline.ir)

crimes”, “generating instability”, of “violation of the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and international law”, and of supporting the “Zionist regime” in “occupation and genocide”.

However, following After the last round of meetings in Rome, held on April 19<sup>th</sup>, the accounts of the Iranian embassies adopting a more moderate line, expressing a contained satisfaction for the outcome while, at the same time, attacking Israel once again, with accusations of “genocide”, aggression” and “fomenting Iranophobia”. However, this time the Iranians did not target the US.

### **Iran’s tactical playbook:**

- ✓ **Pause** the nuclear program (via negotiations, sanctions discussions) → **Accelerate** proxy force buildup.
- ✓ **Wait out** the Trump administration while maintaining active proxies → **Ramp up** the nuclear program later.

### **The Arab perspective**

#### **The Nuclear Talks in Oman and Their Regional Significance: A Diplomatic Front or a New Boiling Point?**

The ongoing negotiations between the United States and Iran in Oman have drawn increasing attention - not only due to the nuclear issue, but also because of the underlying dynamics: a potential reconfiguration of the regional balance of power, with direct implications for Israel, Arab states, and Tehran’s strategic proxies.

Articles published over the past week in the pan-Arab press attempt to outline the current state of the 2025 nuclear talks, not only from the perspectives of the key players (Iran, the U.S., and Israel), but also in terms of their impact on regional power relations and interests.

Writers in the Arab media are clear: Iran is approaching the negotiations from a position of weakness. Severe economic sanctions and the weakening of the Iranian-led axis have taken their toll. In contrast, former President Donald Trump - now beginning his second term - enters the talks from a position of relative strength. Yet, there is an understanding, even within the U.S., that a military confrontation could escalate the situation rather than produce a solution that serves American interests. As such, Trump, with more experience in global affairs and a keen business instinct, seems to prefer striking a deal that would stabilize the situation - so long as it aligns with key U.S. interests, especially economic ones.

Columnist Mathna Abdullah believes that Iran is being extremely cautious about a potential military clash with Washington, fully aware of its far-reaching consequences. In his view, Tehran is seeking a diplomatic resolution and may agree to freeze its nuclear program under strict international supervision. In his article for Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Abdullah quotes a senior Iranian official claiming that Trump is demanding an end to Iran’s regional influence, a dismantling of its

nuclear program, and the cessation of its missile activity - terms that seem unacceptable to Tehran. However, the writer argues that this official forgets Trump's primary goal: economic gain - a factor Iran previously ignored, but which has resurfaced, most recently in statements by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's advisor, Ali Larijani.

A compelling analysis of Iran's current approach to its regional proxies is provided by columnist Abdullah bin Bajad Al-Otaibi. Writing in the London-based Saudi daily Asharq Al-Awsat (April 13, 2025), Al-Otaibi asserts that the U.S., under Trump, is leading a global effort to dismantle the influence of Iran's "Axis of Resistance." According to him, Trump's policies are far more aggressive than Obama's, and Iran appears willing to sacrifice its proxies in exchange for improved terms with the U.S. Hence, Tehran limits its responses to "symbolic" missile launches against Israel, primarily via the Houthis in Yemen.

Columnist Nadim Koteich, also writing in Asharq Al-Awsat (April 13, 2025), compares Iran's strategy to walking a tightrope: trying to extract concessions that would stabilize the regime, without entirely abandoning its nuclear program - which remains the last pillar of its regional standing. Koteich underscores the gap between Israel's maximalist position (demanding "zero enrichment," "zero centrifuges," and "zero nuclear activity") and the U.S. administration's more focused goal of simply preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. He argues that Israel's fears have translated not only into aggressive diplomatic efforts in Washington, but also into operational actions on the ground: strikes in Lebanon, targeted assassinations in Syria, and even explicit threats against Tehran.

And what of the other regional players in the Middle East? Arab states - especially the Gulf nations - feel sidelined in the current discourse as for the broader regional actors, particularly the Arab states of the Gulf, there is a growing sense of marginalization amid the ongoing dialogue. These states are attempting to position themselves between the two poles. Some have already moved closer to Israel through normalization agreements, but still feel they have not received meaningful political concessions.

Iyad Abu Shakra, another Asharq Al-Awsat columnist (April 13, 2025), notes that Saudi Arabia, for example, is seeking a broader regional arrangement - one that includes the Palestinian issue, not just a nuclear deal.



According to Abu Shakra, Israel is exploiting the region's current disarray and its unwavering U.S. backing to push forward with its security agenda. He writes:

“While Washington and Tehran hold talks over the heads of the region's peoples, Israel's far-right continues to march forward, expanding its objectives. One could say that Netanyahu has temporarily achieved his goals - thanks to full U.S. support. But the open question remains: Will he be satisfied with the outcome of the new round of talks with Tehran, or will he - as is his habit - charge ahead through coercion and escalation?”

A broader view of the regional landscape, as seen through the lens of Arab columnists, reveals the complex picture surrounding the negotiating table in Oman: Iran, determined to retain influence under immense internal and external pressure; the U.S., trying to secure economic interests while avoiding military escalation - but without compromising on its demand to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb; Israel, exploiting the shifting regional dynamics to pursue its security objectives; and the Arab world - feeling marginalized - still seeking its place between the competing powers.