

**OPINION / IRAN**

# Can there be a deal between Iran and the US in the new year?

*Trump's maximum pressure policy against Iran has failed, but a deal that would satisfy both sides can still be achieved.*

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US President Donald Trump displays an executive order imposing fresh sanctions on Iran in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, US, June 24, 2019 [Carlos Barria/Reuters]

On December 29, the United States' military carried out air raids in Iraq and Syria on bases belonging to the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) paramilitary group, killing at least 25 people and injuring many others. In response, thousands of the group's supporters stormed the US embassy in Baghdad, smashing a main door and setting fire to a reception area.

Reacting to the incident, US President Donald Trump said he held Iran "fully responsible" and warned that Tehran would "pay a very big price", but when asked later in the day about the possibility of tensions spiralling into a war, he told reporters he does not "see that happening".

Nevertheless, the incident demonstrated the fragile nature of the peace between Iran and the US, and highlighted the importance of a sustainable deal being reached between the two nations.

The efforts to do just that have been ongoing.

On December 20, for example, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe hosted Iran's President Hassan Rouhani in Tokyo to help efforts to maintain the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and a group of world powers known as the P5+1 - the US, the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia and Germany.

Rouhani's visit to the Japanese capital - the first by an Iranian president in almost 20 years - marked the latest chapter in Japan's diplomatic efforts to reduce tensions between Iran and the Trump administration, which unilaterally withdrew the US from the nuclear deal and embarked on a maximum pressure strategy against Iran, putting it under increased economic, political and diplomatic pressure.

In June 2019, Prime Minister Abe was in Tehran to help broker a possible dialogue between the US and its Middle Eastern nemesis. The trip, during which Abe urged the Iranian leadership to keep abiding by international nuclear rules and to play a "constructive role" for regional security, came shortly after President Trump's state visit to Japan in which Iran was one of the main topics of discussion.

And Abe is not the only world leader working to ease tensions between Washington and Tehran. In September 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron tried to mediate between Trump and Rouhani on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

So far, however, mediation efforts have achieved little success. The December 7 prisoner swap between the two nations, which was facilitated by Switzerland, is the only small indication we have that easing of tensions may be possible. But can Tokyo - or anyone else - actually succeed in securing a deal between Iran and the US in the new year?

## **A 2020 US-Iran deal is still on the cards**

Trump is a politician who does not like to share credit with anyone. As a result, it is highly unlikely that he will allow any other world leader, be it Abe or Macron, to play a primary role in the negotiations between Tehran and Washington and get a chance to say that they made the resolution of the "Iran problem" possible, if and when that happens. Hence, a major breakthrough in Iran's predicament seems unlikely in the absence of a face-to-face meeting between Trump and Rouhani, which would allow the US president to claim he singlehandedly resolved the issue.

But are conditions ready for such a landmark meeting to take place in the coming year?

Iranian officials have repeatedly rejected direct talks with Washington while Iran is subject to sanctions, which Trump reimposed after withdrawing last year from the 2015 nuclear accord. The Iranian leadership views sanctions as an attempt to initiate regime change in Iran, and refuses to negotiate with an aggressive foe hell-bent on their demise.

Trump has said that all he wants from Iran is for it to commit to never acquiring nuclear weapons and that he is not interested in regime change. He reiterated that during his visit to Japan in May.

Iran "has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership", Trump said at a joint news conference in Tokyo alongside Abe. "We are not looking for regime change. I just want to make that clear."

"I'm not looking to hurt Iran at all. I'm looking to have Iran say no nuclear weapons," the US president added. "No nuclear weapons for Iran and I think we will make a deal."

If Trump can convince the Iranian leadership that he is not looking for regime change, and that he respects their rights and legitimate interests, then a meeting between him and the Iranian president, based on mutual respect, could be on the cards this year, as well as a deal that would open a new chapter in relations between Iran and the US.

For such a deal to materialise, however, the US would first need to end its "maximum pressure" campaign as a goodwill gesture and agree to lift sanctions on Iran.

## The four main pillars of a successful Iran deal

A deal that would satisfy both the US and Iran would need to have four main components.

First, a guarantee that Iran would commit to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the centrepiece of global efforts to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons.

Second, a guarantee that both the US and Iran would commit to the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 endorsing the 2015 nuclear deal and setting out a rigorous monitoring mechanism and timetable for implementation, while paving the way for the lifting of UN sanctions against the country.

Third, a nuclear "fatwa" (religious verdict) by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei that bans the production, possession and stockpiling of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. As Iran's commitment to the NPT and the 2015 nuclear deal would likely be insufficient to convince Trump that Iran did indeed give up on ever acquiring nuclear weapons, a religious commitment in the form of a nuclear fatwa could help fill the gap of trust between the parties.

Fourth, a guarantee that neither Iran nor Washington and its allies in the Middle East would take any action that would threaten the security and stability of the region.

While under the current circumstances direct talks between the US and Iran on regional issues such as the war in Yemen or the situation in Iraq are unlikely, the US can endorse Iran's "Hormuz Peace Endeavor" proposal to make sure that normalisation with Iran does not leave its regional allies exposed to Iranian dominance.

Speaking at the UN in September, President Rouhani offered this new cooperative regional mechanism to promote "peace, stability, progress and welfare" for all the residents of the region and enhance mutual understanding and friendly relations among them. Rouhani said the initiative would include "various venues for cooperation", such as the collective supply of energy security, freedom of navigation and free transfer of oil and other resources to and from the Strait of Hormuz and beyond.

The new initiative could address needs and concerns shared by most Middle Eastern nations, such as: 1) the need for increased regional arms control and security building, 2) establishment of a weapons of mass destruction free zone around the Gulf, 3) establishment of mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of regional conflicts, 4) preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all countries in the region, 5) a regional commitment to non-intervention and non-aggression, and 6) new mechanisms for regional cooperation on humanitarian issues including the treatment of migrants, refugees and displaced people.

These items are unanimously on the US's wish list for the Middle East, too.

## The maximum pressure policy is not working

More than a year after its implementation, it is now clear that the US's maximum pressure policy against Iran is not working. Iran's political, military and religious leadership does not appear to be buckling under US economic pressure.

Iran will not be the first state to withstand sanctions. A comprehensive study of 170 cases of economic sanctions imposed in the 20th century revealed that less than one-third of them achieved their political goals. Another study found that economic sanctions in the 20th century have had less than 5 percent success. One side effect of the Trump administration's imposition of sanctions on Iran has been a shift in Iran's priorities to find its trade partners in the east, particularly China.

No doubt the Trump administration's sanctions have hurt Iran. High inflation rates and unemployment are damaging Iran's economy. Its oil exports have shrunk dramatically and, according to the International Monetary Fund, Iran's economy has shrunk by 9.5 percent this year. The sanctions have hurt the living standards of people and shortages of medical and pharmaceutical products have had a serious impact on the population - especially on cancer patients. Despite the recent anti-regime protests, however, the Iranian public does not want their government to surrender to American demands.

Moreover, in the longer term, Iran has been on an upward trajectory: life expectancy has risen, from 54 years in 1980 to 74 in 2012; the national youth literacy rate is 98 percent; and Iran's scientific output rose 18-fold between 1996 and 2008, making it the fastest-growing country in terms of scientific production in the world. Iran has also been able to develop extensively its domestic manufacturing and its hi-tech industries such as aerospace, telecommunications, machine tools, conventional weapons and petrochemicals. According to Forbes, 335,000 Iranian graduates finished

a degree in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in 2016, ranking fifth after China, India, US, and Russia as the most science-educated country in the world.

More than a year and a half since its implementation, the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy on Iran has clearly failed. It is now time for the US to adopt a new strategy - one that avoids the mistakes of the past. An unstable Iran could lead to the re-emergence of terrorist groups with global influence such as ISIL (ISIS). If Trump wants a fair and enduring deal, the four pillar package offers a path forward. This new year is a good time to change discourse and experiment with a new, more sustainable and constructive strategy based on the reality on the ground.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***