



## Talking to Rouhani: Is Trump Shooting from the Hip or Reading from a Script?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Message to Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Tel Aviv: Not to worry. US President Donald J. Trump has no intention of unconditionally meeting his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani. On the contrary: Trump's surprise announcement that he is willing to talk to Rouhani is likely part of a plan formulated almost a year ago by National Security Advisor John R. Bolton before he returned to government service.

President Donald Trump's announcement that he is willing to meet unconditionally with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani took many by surprise. It threatened to reinforce the impression, even among America's closest friends in the Middle East, that Trump is a supportive but unpredictable and unreliable ally.

His offer to talk to Rouhani appeared to put in doubt his withdrawal in May from the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program and reimposition of harsh economic sanctions aimed at destabilizing, if not toppling, Iran's government.

John Bolton's plan suggests otherwise.

Bolton published a plan, drafted at the request of Trump's then strategic advisor, Steve Bannon, in August of 2017 after he had lost hope of presenting it to the president in person.

The plan meticulously lays out the arguments Trump has employed to justify the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and steps the US should take to garner international support for the sanctions regime.

"Iran is not likely to seek further negotiations once the JCPOA is abrogated, but the Administration may wish to consider rhetorically leaving that possibility

open in order to demonstrate Iran's actual underlying intention to develop deliverable nuclear weapons, an intention that has never flagged," the plan said. (JCPOA is the acronym for the nuclear accord's official designation, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.)

Trump's surprise announcement hardly proves the allegation that Iran intends to develop a military nuclear capability, but it does constitute an attempt to gain the moral high ground and weaken European, Russian, and Chinese support for the agreement by demonstrating that Iran is recalcitrant and unwilling to come to the table.

The president's offer puts Iran in a bind. Refusal to talk serves Trump's purpose, but an agreement to engage would increase domestic hardline pressure on the Iranian president and involve him in discussions that, given US policy, have little chance of success.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Rouhani advisor Hamid Aboutalebi said as much in separate statements in the wake of Trump's offer.

"If the Iranians demonstrate a commitment to make fundamental changes in how they treat their own people, reduce their malign behavior, can agree that it's worthwhile to enter in a nuclear agreement that actually prevents proliferation, then the president said he's prepared to sit down and have a conversation with him," [Pompeo clarified](#).

Aboutalebi suggested that Rouhani would be willing to meet Trump if he demonstrated "[respect for the great nation of Iran, returned to the nuclear deal, and reduced his hostility](#) towards the Islamic Republic.

Aboutalebi was probably referring not only to Trump's long-standing anti-Iranian bluster, withdrawal from the agreement, and reimposition of sanctions, but also to Bolton's plan, which the president's policy appears to embody.

"With Israel and selected others, we will discuss military options. With others in the Gulf region, we can also discuss means to address their concerns [arising] from Iran's menacing behavior," the plan suggests.

Few believe that either the US or Iran wants a direct military confrontation.

Bolton as well as other associates of Trump's have, however, been unequivocal in their calls for regime change in Tehran. They support demands for the violent overthrow of the Iranian government by an Iranian exile group that is well-connected with Western governments and political elites but has little apparent support in Iran.

So does Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of the kingdom's intelligence service and past ambassador to Britain and the US, who is believed

to often express views that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman prefers not to voice himself.

Bolton's plan contains building blocks for attempts to destabilize Iran not only by squeezing it economically but also by spurring insurgencies among the country's ethnic minorities.

The plan envisions official US support "for the democratic Iranian opposition," "Kurdish national aspirations in Iran, Iraq and Syria," and assistance for the Baloch in the Pakistani province of Balochistan and in Iran's neighboring Sistan and Baluchestan province as well as for Iranian Arabs in the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan. It also suggests expedited delivery of bunker-buster bombs to US allies.

Mustafa Hijri, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), [met last month during a visit to Washington at the invitation of the Trump administration with Steven Fagin](#), the then head of the State Department's Office of Iranian Affairs, who has since been appointed counsel general in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The KDPI has recently [stepped up its attacks in Iranian Kurdistan](#), killing nine people weeks before Hijri's meeting with Fagin. Other Kurdish groups have reported similar attacks. Several Iranian Kurdish groups are discussing ways to coordinate efforts to confront the Iranian regime.

A Saudi think tank, believed to be backed by Prince Muhammad, called last year in a [study](#) for Saudi support for a low-level Baloch insurgency in Iran.

Pakistani militants have claimed that Saudi Arabia has stepped up funding of militant *madrassas* (religious seminaries) in Balochistan that allegedly serve as havens for anti-Iranian fighters.

Said Iran scholar Ahmad Majidyar: "Iran's southeastern and northwestern regions – home to marginalized ethnic and religious minorities – have seen an uptick in violence by separatist and militant groups... [Sistan and Baluchestan can be a breeding ground](#) for local militant and separatist movements as well regional and international terrorist groups."

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