



Nuclear Diplomacy or Regime Survival? Rethinking the Iran Deal

Loqman Radpey

In response to President Donald Trump's [letter](#) to Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, proposing a new nuclear deal, Khamenei's stance was unequivocal: rejection, [dismissing](#) it as "deception of public opinion." Yet, within the Iranian government, conflicting signals emerged, with some [officials](#) suggesting the offer was under [consideration](#). This strategic ambiguity is not new. Khamenei employed the same tactic during negotiations for the collapsed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), allowing him to distance himself from any fallout should the deal collapse. Ultimately, however, history has shown that under pressure, the regime will capitulate—what Iran's leaders call "drinking the poisoned chalice." But assuming a new deal materializes, what would it mean for the people of Iran?

In 2018, President Donald Trump [withdrew](#) from the JCPOA, the nuclear agreement brokered by President Barack Obama in 2015, as it "failed to protect America's national security interests." Trump justified his withdrawal by arguing that the agreement, as "a windfall of cash", did not curbed Iran's malign activities. Instead, he contended, it provided financial resources that "enriched the Iranian regime and enabled its malign behavior."

For Iran's non-Persian national and ethnic groups, the failure of the JCPOA was also due to its [disregard](#) for human rights and domestic oppression. Western negotiators prioritized nuclear and missiles restrictions and regional security while sidelining the people's suffering under an authoritarian regime. The economic relief from the deal landed in the hands of regime elites, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and their affiliates. Ordinary peoples saw little benefit. Instead, the regime doubled down on its crackdown against marginalized groups, including Kurds, Baloch, and Arabs. With reduced external pressure, Tehran felt emboldened to impose its Persian-Shia ideological [hegemony](#) even more aggressively.

Now, with [talks](#) of a renewed deal [resurfacing](#), one must ask: will this agreement, like its predecessor, serve only the regime's interests? Trump's letter outlined [conditions](#) for sanctions relief, including an end to Iran's nuclear weapons program, cessation of uranium enrichment, ceasing financial support to Hezbollah and halting arms transfers to the Houthis, and dismantling its militias in Iraq. However, these terms, like before, fail to address the human rights abuses within Iran. If a future deal ignores these realities, it will once again be the oppressed groups who pay the price.

The absence of human rights considerations in Western negotiations with Iran is not incidental—it is a [consistent](#) pattern. Historically, the West has often prioritized short-term strategic gains over the long-term aspirations of the people in Iran. The result has been a cycle of diplomatic engagements that empower the ruling elite while leaving everyday people in a deepening state of economic hardship and political repression. Sanctions relief, while theoretically aimed at improving the people's economy, has instead served as a financial injection for the regime's military-industrial complex, allowing it to tighten its grip on power.



For Iran's diverse population—comprising Baluchis, Kurds, Armenians, Qashqais, Azeris, Arabs, Turkmens, Gilakis, Tabaris, Talyshis, and religious groups including Jews and Bahais—a nuclear deal that fails to address their plight could be devastating. The regime's persecution of non-Persian groups has been marked by disproportionate [executions](#) of Kurds and Baluchis, arbitrary detentions, and systematic cultural suppression. Economic marginalization has left these groups disproportionately affected by unemployment, poverty, and lack of access to basic services. A deal that does not explicitly condition sanctions relief on improvements in human rights will serve as yet another tool for the government to sustain its policies of repression and forced assimilation. Moreover, the suppression of dissent extends to students, journalists, and activists who have faced severe crackdowns for expressing opposition to the regime's policies.

This regime operates outside conventional norms, yet Western commentators in mainstream media, instead of acknowledging the ideological and religious motives of Iran's Shi'ite rulers, continue to search for rational justifications that overlook the regime's true nature. If the past is any indication, a nuclear deal without guarantees for the people of Iran will reinforce the status quo: economic benefits funneled to regime elites, intensified repression of national and ethnic minorities, and continued expansion of Iran's regional influence at the expense of its citizens. A more "comprehensive" approach to diplomacy with Iran must incorporate human rights as a core negotiating principle. Strict oversight and accountability measures must be implemented to prevent state-controlled entities, such as the judiciary, from imposing verdicts on the people, and the IRGC from monopolizing financial resources and oppressing dissidents. Furthermore, human rights organizations and genuine opposition figures should have a voice in shaping the terms of any agreement.

Ultimately, the goal of any nuclear deal should also aim to create conditions that empower its people to pursue democratic aspirations. A policy that prioritizes human rights alongside the security of Israel and the US would be strategically effective in fostering long-term stability in the region.