Beat: Politics

Will Trump Bring Iran Back Into America's Fold?

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USPA NEWS - U.S.–Iranian relations stand today at a critical crossroads, shaped by decades of mutual hostility and dramatic shifts. A central question looms over this complex landscape: Will Trump bring Iran back into America's fold? That is, can Washington reintegrate Tehran into the regional and international order under American influence—especially amid reports of negotiations in Muscat and enticing offers to Iran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear and missile programs?

This question is rooted in an analytical reading of the multifaceted relationship between the two countries, as explored by researcher Suzanne Maloney in her recent book Iran Reconsidered: The Nuclear Deal and the Quest for a New Moderation. Published only weeks ago, Maloney's book—alongside numerous analytical reports preceding and following the recent rounds of negotiations—offers a framework for understanding the evolving dynamics between Tehran and Washington.
In her book, Maloney discusses how the Islamic Republic has repeatedly experimented with reform and openness since the 1979 Revolution, only to see each episode of moderation end in failure. Despite some institutional evolution over the decades, "the most problematic elements of revolutionary ideology and governance remain firmly entrenched," she writes.

Maloney thus raises the question: can the 2015 nuclear deal, the fruit of an unprecedented dialogue between Tehran and Washington, truly catalyze a lasting transformation in the nature of the Islamic Republic and its fraught relationship with the world?
Suzanne Maloney is vice president and director of foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, where she focuses on Iran and Gulf energy policy. Before becoming director, she served as deputy director of foreign policy for five years. As a leading voice on U.S. policy toward Iran and the broader Middle East, Maloney has testified before Congress, briefed policymakers, and worked closely with governments, nonprofits, and corporations. She serves on the external research council of the National Intelligence Council and is a regular commentator in both national and international media.

Maloney has advised both Democratic and Republican administrations on Iran policy, including as an outside advisor to senior officials during the Obama administration and as a member of the policy planning staff under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Earlier in her career, she served as Middle East advisor to ExxonMobil, where she handled government relations across the region.
She has authored or edited three books on Iran: The Iranian Revolution at Forty, The Political Economy of Iran Since the Revolution, and Iran's Long Reach. Her writings have appeared in numerous academic journals, think tank reports, and major publications including The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Foreign Affairs. In 2004, she led and authored a Council on Foreign Relations task force on U.S. policy toward Iran, co-chaired by former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Maloney holds a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and studied in Tehran as part of the first U.S.–Iran academic exchange since the 1979 Revolution.

To understand the complexity of today's relationship, we must revisit the historical roots of animosity between Washington and Tehran.

The United States and Iran were not long-time allies, but Americans played a formative and even constructive role in every foundational moment of modern Iran—up until 1953. During the 1905 Constitutional Revolution, an American schoolteacher was killed while advocating for the rule of law. American missionaries established dozens of hospitals and schools throughout the country, helping to educate a generation of future leaders and expand women's access to education.
In the final years of the Qajar dynasty and the early Pahlavi era, American officials were seconded to assist in improving financial administration, implementing bureaucratic reforms, and reorganizing the national gendarmerie. The U.S. also defended Iran's interests at international forums, such as the Paris Peace Conference following World War I, and again after World War II when Soviet troops fomented separatist movements in northern Iran and refused to withdraw as agreed.

This promising beginning—contrasted favorably with the imperial manipulation of Britain and Russia—was later overshadowed by the U.S. role in the 1953 coup against nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, followed by decades of unwavering American support for Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The coup was a watershed moment that marked a profound shift in Iranian perceptions of the U.S. role in their affairs. With the CIA restoring the monarchy and pouring in vast amounts of technical and financial aid, Washington gained a vested interest in the Shah's survival.

That support enabled the Shah to consolidate power and build a highly centralized state. However, over time, the costs of the coup became apparent: it fostered paranoia, empowered repression, and undermined the legitimacy of the Pahlavi dynasty. Yet, amid Cold War dynamics, these drawbacks were largely ignored by U.S. policymakers.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the relationship between the Shah and Washington deepened. Commercial ties expanded, especially following the 1973 oil price surge, which quadrupled Iran's oil revenues. This windfall allowed the Shah to embark on a massive military buildup—spending more than $16 billion on American arms between 1972 and 1977, along with roughly $3 billion annually in civilian trade.

The bilateral relationship extended well beyond energy and weapons. Between 1973 and 1978, telephone calls between the U.S. and Iran soared by 1,600%. Around 60,000 Iranians lived or studied in the U.S., while some 50,000 Americans worked in Iran. Over 50 American universities operated branches or partnerships with Iranian counterparts. Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz became glamorous destinations: Andy Warhol visited to paint the Empress, Elizabeth Taylor sipped vodka and caviar, and the Shah invited the star of The Six Million Dollar Man—his son's favorite TV actor—along with his wife Farrah Fawcett.

In 1965, The New York Times wrote: "This is a magical land where modernity, under a young, enlightened monarch and immense oil wealth, blends with one of the oldest known civilizations." To Americans, Pahlavi-era Iran was distant but familiar—seemingly on an inevitable path to modernity.

The Shah believed so as well. He detested tradition and, as he wrote in his memoirs, "I couldn't stop building department stores. I wanted a modern country." Euphoric with success, he boasted that Iran's economy would surpass that of Germany and France by the end of the century. Ignoring his advisors' concerns, he doubled state spending in 1973. But even record oil revenues could not match his ambition. Iran suffered all the hallmarks of overdevelopment: rising inflation, rampant corruption, income inequality, urban crowding without adequate infrastructure, structural bottlenecks, poor efficiency, and an influx of foreign labor that caused cultural friction.

Tehran's attempts to manage the consequences of economic volatility often backfired, especially as the Shah's autocratic tendencies intensified. Since 1953, he had systematically eliminated threats to his rule through a fearsome secret police and strict limits on political activity. Eventually, his regime faced an unprecedented uprising, driven by an unlikely alliance of traditional nationalists, radical Marxists, and politically mobilized clerics.

The revolution caught Washington off guard, though it arguably should not have. Signs of unrest had long been visible—from radical groups attacking Americans, to bursts of intellectual activity during periods of political opening, to demonstrators surrounding the Pahlavis (and even the White House during their visits), along with hundreds of other indicators of political alienation and economic discontent. Yet the monarchy's collapse was swift and stunning. Just a year before the Shah's humiliating departure from Tehran, President Jimmy Carter had toasted Iran as an "island of stability in a turbulent region."

The 1953 coup was a pivotal moment in shaping Iran's enduring suspicion of the United States. That year, the CIA and British intelligence orchestrated the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh after he nationalized Iran's oil industry, long dominated by British interests. This intervention culminated in the restoration of a Western-friendly monarchy under the Shah—a move that, as Maloney notes, left deep scars on the Iranian national psyche.

For over 25 years afterward, the Shah increasingly relied on American backing to consolidate his rule, even as public resentment toward him grew. The memory of foreign interference in Iran's political destiny festered within the Iranian collective consciousness, eventually exploding into the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

By the late 1970s, domestic unrest reached a tipping point. The Shah's regime, riddled with corruption and perceived as a puppet of Western powers, faced growing opposition. The revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, marked a radical rupture—toppling the monarchy and establishing a new Islamic Republic openly hostile to American influence. The Shah fled, ultimately seeking medical treatment in the U.S., while Khomeini returned triumphantly from 14 years in exile to assume leadership as Supreme Leader of the new theocratic regime.

The revolution transformed Iran from a close U.S. ally into a defiant Islamic state bent on exporting its revolutionary ideology across the region. Khomeini made no secret of his ambition to inspire radical Islamist movements abroad.

Within months of the revolution, the U.S.–Iran relationship plunged into crisis. In November 1979, hardline Iranian students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran, taking 52 diplomats and staff hostage for 444 days. They demanded the return of the Shah to face trial in Iran. President Carter's administration responded by severing diplomatic ties, imposing an oil embargo, and freezing Iranian assets.

Eventually, through complex negotiations facilitated by intermediaries, the Algiers Accords were signed in January 1981, securing the hostages' release. Washington pledged in the agreement to respect Iran's sovereignty and refrain from meddling in its internal affairs—a symbolic gesture widely interpreted as tacit recognition of America's past transgressions, including its role in the 1953 coup. But the damage had been done. The hostage crisis cemented mutual enmity. Throughout the 1980s, the two nations engaged in bloody proxy battles. The United States, both openly and covertly, supported Iraq in its war against Iran (1980–1988), supplying intelligence and military aid even after Iraq's use of chemical weapons became known.
Meanwhile, the U.S. accused Iran of sponsoring terrorist attacks against its interests and allies—including the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut by Hezbollah, Iran's Lebanese proxy. Thus began a phase of intense ideological hostility: Tehran's rallying cry became "Death to America," while Washington adopted a strategy of containment and isolation toward the Islamic Republic.

Despite decades dominated by conflict and mistrust, there were occasional attempts to thaw relations and establish tentative communication channels. After the end of the Iran–Iraq War in the late 1980s and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, a more pragmatic leadership emerged in Tehran, represented first by President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and later by reformist President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). Khatami adopted a relatively conciliatory rhetoric toward the West, advocating for a "Dialogue of Civilizations" and making overtures to improve Iran's international image.
Washington responded cautiously. Toward the end of President Bill Clinton's term, a brief period of détente—referred to as the "small thaw" (1998–2000)—emerged. For the first time since the revolution, senior American and Iranian officials held face-to-face meetings, notably between Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister at the United Nations in 1998. In a landmark 2000 speech, Albright acknowledged the U.S. role in the 1953 coup and characterized previous American policies toward Iran as "short-sighted and regrettable."

Symbolically, the U.S. eased some economic sanctions.

These gestures amounted to a quasi-apology and a signal of willingness to turn the page. However, they remained modest and failed to yield a lasting reconciliation.
Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, a rare tactical convergence emerged. Iran cooperated implicitly with the George W. Bush administration in the campaign to oust the Taliban in Afghanistan—an enemy to both nations. Through backchannel coordination, Iran supported the 2001 Bonn Agreement to establish a post-Taliban government in Kabul and helped facilitate humanitarian aid and refugee repatriation.
This fragile opening, however, was short-lived. Bush's infamous "Axis of Evil" speech in January 2002 included Iran alongside Iraq and North Korea, accusing Tehran of "aggressively pursuing weapons of mass destruction, sponsoring terrorism, and repressing its people's aspirations for freedom." The speech shocked Tehran and abruptly halted all covert dialogue with Washington.

The relationship reverted to a state of heightened tension—especially after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Iran opposed but indirectly benefited from by seeing its longtime nemesis Saddam Hussein removed from power.

Nonetheless, behind-the-scenes efforts continued. In 2003, at the early stages of the Iraq war, Tehran sent a proposal—known as the "grand bargain"—via Swiss intermediaries, offering to negotiate on a comprehensive set of issues: the nuclear program, support for Hezbollah and Hamas, hostility toward Israel, and more. In exchange, Iran sought full normalization and the lifting of sanctions.
But the Bush administration ignored the proposal—perhaps emboldened by its success in Baghdad and eyeing regime change in Tehran itself. This diplomatic rebuff, coupled with mounting U.S.

Pressure, weakened Iran's reformist camp and ushered in a hardline resurgence. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) adopted a confrontational tone and accelerated the nuclear program, escalating tensions.
Throughout the 2000s, international sanctions against Iran widened, especially after the exposure of secret enrichment facilities in 2002. Still, many in Washington remained hopeful that a change in Iranian leadership could pave the way for rapprochement.

That hope materialized with the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric backed by reformists and centrists. Rouhani campaigned on a platform of engagement and pledged to resolve the nuclear standoff.
Rouhani's election marked a turning point. Iran swiftly entered into secret negotiations with the United States, mediated by Oman, which culminated in the preliminary Geneva agreement in November 2013. In a historic gesture, President Barack Obama placed a direct phone call to Rouhani in September 2013—the first direct communication between the two nations' leaders since 1979.
These backchannel efforts ultimately led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in July 2015. The agreement imposed unprecedented limitations on Iran's nuclear program: reducing its number of centrifuges, capping enriched uranium

stockpiles, and redesigning the Arak reactor to prevent plutonium production. In return, the U.S. and its allies committed to gradually lifting nuclear-related sanctions.

The West's stated goal was to extend Iran's "breakout time"—the time needed to accumulate sufficient fissile material for one nuclear weapon—from a few weeks to at least one year. Simultaneously, the deal offered Iran significant economic relief and a path back into the global community.
The agreement was hailed as a triumph of diplomacy by the Obama administration and its European allies. Obama called it "the best option to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon," while Rouhani praised it as a "political victory" that preserved Iran's rights and ended its international isolation.
Yet the deal sparked fierce opposition from critics in Washington, Tel Aviv, and the Gulf capitals. Opponents argued that lifting sanctions would financially and politically empower Iran without fundamentally altering its destabilizing regional behavior.

Here, Suzanne Maloney's analytical lens is particularly salient. She contends that the nature of Iran's regime makes its nuclear and regional ambitions especially dangerous. A mere agreement, she suggests, cannot by itself change the core dynamics of such a deeply entrenched theocratic system.
In Washington, the debate centered on whether Tehran would truly choose moderation. Proponents of the JCPOA believed it would strengthen Iran's reformist faction and promote gradual integration. Opponents feared the regime would exploit the economic windfall while maintaining its revolutionary posture.
Between 2015 and 2018, both sides tested their assumptions. Iran, according to international inspectors, complied with the deal's nuclear constraints. The country saw moderate economic recovery, with a surge in oil exports and increased foreign investment. The Obama administration responded by easing financial restrictions and encouraging broader engagement with Iran.

Nevertheless, the underlying hostility between the two states persisted. Iran continued backing its regional allies in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, often challenging American influence in these arenas. Tensions remained subdued but unresolved.
Domestically, the JCPOA temporarily bolstered Rouhani's position. However, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remained wary of Western influence, fearing it might erode their ideological control. As Maloney notes, "the most dogmatic elements of the Islamic Republic's ideology and institutions remained impervious to change."

Thus, the much-anticipated "new moderation" proved limited and conditional.

With Donald Trump's arrival at the White House in 2017, U.S. policy toward Iran underwent a dramatic shift. Trump adopted a hardline stance, denouncing the nuclear agreement as one of the "worst deals ever" and committing to a strategy of "maximum pressure" designed to force a comprehensive change in Iran's behavior—not just regarding its nuclear program, but also its missile development and regional influence.

In May 2018, Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and reimposed sweeping sanctions on Iran. The move dealt a devastating blow to the Rouhani–Zarif camp in Tehran and alienated America's European allies, who had tried in vain to preserve the deal.
Tensions quickly escalated. The Trump administration imposed unprecedented economic sanctions that crippled Iran's economy. It designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization—the first time the U.S. had applied such a label to a formal arm of another state. U.S. military presence in the Gulf was reinforced, and threats against Tehran became more frequent, including Trump's infamous tweet warning that any attack would result in Iran's "official end."

In response, Iran began a carefully calibrated escalation strategy. Starting in 2019, Tehran gradually rolled back its JCPOA commitments: enriching uranium at higher levels, operating more advanced centrifuges, and breaching the agreement's caps on stockpiles. Iran was also accused of orchestrating or directing attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and on Saudi oil facilities—including the September 2019 Aramco attacks. In June 2019, Iran shot down a U.S. surveillance drone over the Gulf, pushing the two countries to the brink of open conflict.
The most dangerous flashpoint came in early 2020 when the U.S. assassinated General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, in a drone strike near Baghdad. Iran retaliated with a volley of ballistic missiles targeting American bases in Iraq. With both sides issuing threats of further escalation, the risk of a major war loomed large.

In this highly charged environment, prospects for diplomacy between Trump and Iran's hardline leadership all but disappeared. Tehran, already skeptical of U.S. intentions, viewed Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA as proof that negotiations were futile. Internally, the maximum pressure campaign weakened the moderate faction and empowered Iran's conservatives. This shift

culminated in the 2021 election of Ebrahim Raisi—a cleric closely aligned with the IRGC—to succeed Rouhani as president.
Nevertheless, some observers argued that Trump's aggressive pressure tactics might ultimately push Iran back to the negotiating table from a position of weakness. The economic siege had plunged Iran into recession and triggered widespread domestic unrest, including the mass protests of 2019.

Maloney's book sheds light on the intellectual underpinnings of this strategy. Hawks in Washington—some of whom influenced Trump's Iran policy—believed that tightening the noose was the only way to compel structural change in Tehran. The real issue, in their view, was not merely nuclear activity, but who wielded the power: a revolutionary, theocratic regime with regional ambitions. From this perspective, only a more comprehensive deal—one that also addressed ballistic missiles and regional behavior—would suffice.

Yet the immediate result of Trump's approach was a return to intense polarization. Diplomatic channels were severed. Both sides exchanged open threats of military strikes. Trump repeatedly warned that the U.S. would destroy Iran's nuclear facilities if it approached weaponization, while Tehran threatened to enrich uranium to weapons-grade levels and expel IAEA inspectors if attacked.

Thus, by the end of Trump's first term, U.S.–Iran relations had reverted to crisis mode.

With the election of Joe Biden in 2021, a window appeared to reopen for diplomatic engagement. Biden signaled his willingness to return to the JCPOA, provided Iran resumed full compliance. Indirect negotiations began in Vienna throughout 2021 and 2022, facilitated by European mediators.
However, talks soon became bogged down by key disagreements—chief among them Iran's demand that all U.S. sanctions be lifted and that Washington provide guarantees no future administration would exit the deal. The Biden administration, constrained both legally and politically, could not make such assurances.
Compounding matters, global priorities shifted. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and growing tensions with China consumed Washington's attention. By late 2022, the Vienna negotiations had effectively stalled. Meanwhile, Iran significantly accelerated its nuclear program, enriching uranium beyond 60% purity—edging dangerously close to the 90% threshold required for weapons-grade material.

This prompted urgent warnings from analysts that a decisive moment was approaching: either a new understanding to rein in Iran's nuclear program—or a renewed confrontation.

In this climate of heightened tension, Oman resumed its familiar role as a discreet diplomatic channel between Tehran and Washington. In the first half of 2025, Muscat hosted unofficial backchannel negotiations between American and Iranian envoys aimed at de-escalating the nuclear crisis and laying groundwork for new agreements.
This time, however, a new and surprising twist: Donald Trump had—presumably—returned to the presidency in January 2025 (in the scenario under discussion), meaning the very man who had torpedoed the original JCPOA and threatened Iran with destruction was now leading efforts to strike a new "deal."

According to reports, the first round of Muscat talks in April 2025 unfolded in a "positive and constructive atmosphere," according to both sides. In a rare public signal of seriousness, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met openly with his Omani counterpart in Muscat. Iranian sources suggested both parties were keen to avoid protracted negotiations. Tehran, economically battered, sought swift relief; the Trump administration, impatient by nature, wanted fast results—failing which, the military option remained on the table.

Trump reportedly summed up his approach to journalists by saying, "I want Iran to be a great and happy nation—but it can never, ever have a nuclear weapon." This sentiment was echoed by U.S. Special Envoy Stephen Witkoff, who stated that Washington's goal was the "complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear program"—a demand even more ambitious than the JCPOA's terms and one unlikely to be accepted without major concessions.

So what is the carrot on offer?

Sanctions relief remains the primary incentive the U.S. can offer. In the ongoing Muscat discussions, it's believed that the Americans proposed a gradual lifting of sanctions proportional to Iranian steps like reducing uranium enrichment and halting ballistic missile development. Some leaks even suggest that Trump's second-term administration floated massive investment and economic aid packages if Tehran accepted a comprehensive deal.
Experts note that Iran's untapped market and vast energy resources could attract billions in Western investment once sanctions are

lifted, especially in oil, gas, and petrochemicals—the backbone of Iran's economy. Economic analyses indicate that just a few months of renewed trade could significantly revive Iran's economy, provided Western capital and technology flow in.

Thus, Washington may be betting on offering Iran a "golden return" to the global financial and commercial system. According to the Iranian outlet Tabnak, quoting international relations expert Shireen Hunter, the prospect of American companies investing in Iran is now "on the table." Such a move could shift the strategic calculus not only in Tehran, but also in Beijing and Moscow—potentially opening a new chapter.

Naturally, these promises are met with deep skepticism in Tehran. Iranian officials—particularly within the IRGC and the hardline camp—view any major economic opening to the West with suspicion. Their concern lies not only in political dependency but in the cultural and ideological shifts such openness might unleash. Even if Washington makes generous offers, the central question remains: is Iran's ruling establishment truly willing to make the core concessions being demanded—dismantling parts of its nuclear infrastructure, curbing long-range missile capabilities, and relinquishing key elements of its regional leverage—in exchange for economic benefits?

As of now, delicate negotiations are ongoing. Reports indicate that the main sticking points involve the scope of restrictions on Iran's missile program and the degree of international oversight. Publicly, Iran insists that any deal must focus solely on the nuclear issue and flatly rejects the inclusion of missiles. However, Washington and its allies are pushing to expand the framework to include ballistic missiles and Iranian drones, citing their destabilizing role in the region.

Diplomats familiar with the talks suggest that a compromise might take the form of vaguely worded "self-imposed limitations" by Iran on missile range or payload—avoiding explicit treaty terms that could trigger backlash inside Iran. Similarly, the fate of Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium remains a major obstacle. Israel and Gulf allies are demanding that Iran ship out its excess uranium as a confidence-building measure. Tehran, however, is reluctant to give up its primary bargaining chip.

Is there a middle ground?

Oman's quiet diplomacy is reportedly focused on crafting a comprehensive package: longer and stricter nuclear constraints than those in the 2015 deal, indirect technical limitations on missile development, and in return, phased sanctions relief, economic breathing space, and possibly long-term investment guarantees.

After decades of fluctuating hostility and fleeting openings, the question of "bringing Iran back into America's fold" is far more complex than it appears. The U.S.–Iran relationship is weighed down by historical grievances—from the 1953 coup and support for the Shah to the Islamic Revolution and the hostage crisis.

Every attempted rapprochement has struggled against a backdrop of deep ideological divides and mutual mistrust.

Yet history shows that breakthroughs—however limited—are possible when leaderships align and international conditions are favorable. The Khatami era and the 2015 JCPOA are examples of how temporary détente can be achieved.

Today, under Trump's renewed hardline vision, the prospect of a deal appears more tactical than transformational. Rather than a strategic realignment, the emerging scenario suggests a transactional agreement—one that averts imminent conflict but falls short of full reconciliation.

Trump—or any U.S. administration seeking to avoid a costly war—may aim to defuse the nuclear threat and partially reintegrate Iran into the regional order, ideally pulling it away from its Russia–China axis. Iran, in turn, might view economic relief as a lifeline to salvage its economy and end crippling isolation—without necessarily compromising regime survival.

But the fundamental question remains: can the Islamic Republic's behavior truly be changed through deals and incentives, or will it continue to maneuver, strengthen itself, and revert to defiance?

Suzanne Maloney draws on decades of history to observe that every wave of Iranian "moderation" has eventually faltered. The regime adapts temporarily—only to revert to form. Yet she leaves the door open: Could a deal like the JCPOA truly pave the way for sustainable change?

Only the coming months will tell.

Should the Muscat negotiations yield a new understanding, we may witness a temporary easing of tensions—and a cautious hope for limited transformation in Iran's global engagement. But if diplomacy fails, the specter of open confrontation will once again loom over the Gulf and beyond.

For now, all eyes are on Muscat—waiting to see whether white smoke will emerge to signal progress, or whether the long, bitter standoff between Iran and America will continue to define the Middle East's future.

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