What Iran-U.S. Negotiations Expose About the Nature of the Islamic Republic

written by Nima Sabouri | April 26, 2025

The intricate path of negotiations between Iran and the United States, coupled with their fluctuating rhetoric, offers a crucial lens through which to understand the Islamic Republic's (IR) position within global power dynamics. These events reveal the unique characteristics of the IR and its historical trajectory in relation to the foundational aspects of the global order, not in isolation or opposition as often portrayed. This essay examines the implications of the context surrounding these negotiations for the IR's position in the ongoing realignment of inter-imperialist relations.

The central premise of this analysis is that the IR's emergence and its subsequent evolution are intrinsically linked to its functions within the framework of imperial power relations in reproducing the global order. This essay aims to substantiate this starting point. The insights gained from recent events concerning the IR's nature stem from the pressure of historical developments rather than solely from the efforts of opposition forces. The inherent contradictions within the IR's history and strategies sometimes manifest in ways that exceed the regime's capacity for management and representation, even though these consequences are often addressed through further contradictory actions.

1. When You Are Helpless, Be Submissive, But Boast and Deny!

The trajectory of these negotiations was initiated by continuous threats from Trump, which gained prominence with developments in Syria and Lebanon and solidified into a tangible danger for the IR following the deployment of U.S. warships and bombers in the Indian Ocean.[1] Trump's dominance in determining the negotiation process undermined the Iranian regime's aspirations for "indirect and unconditional negotiations." Moscow's lack of anticipated support further limited the IR's ability to insist on its terms through aggressive political maneuvers.

On the same day Russia approved a strategic cooperation treaty with Iran, the Russian Foreign Ministry clarified that this treaty did not entail military support for the IR in the event of foreign aggression[2] (by the United States). Similarly, Beijing, another eastern ally, could not prioritize further support for the IR due to its trade war with Washington. Consequently, the Iranian leadership found itself isolated in the face of a potential confrontation with Trump.

This situation acutely highlighted the internal disagreements within the IR regarding over-reliance on Russia and the Eastern global power center. Russia's perceived abandonment of the IR in Syria (leaving it to Turkey on behalf of the West) seemed to be repeating itself, with the IR facing the United States alone. This validated the pessimism and warnings from certain elements within the IR

who viewed Iran as merely a pawn in Russia's broader interactions with the West.

Ultimately, the very entities (Beijing and Moscow) once revered in Iran's foreign policy have now been openly or implicitly repudiated, leading to an embrace of the West. Consequently, the beleaguered IR leadership swiftly moved to meet key preconditions for negotiations set by Trump. While this option may have been a long-standing contingency plan, the IR withdrew its advisory and military forces from Yemen[3] and instructed its Yemeni proxies to de-escalate. Similarly, its Iraqi proxy forces[4] (Hashd al-Shaabi, among others) were ordered to adopt 'heroic flexibility.'[5] Finally, Hezbollah in Lebanon,[6] the IR's ideological-military stronghold, was directed to prepare for disarmament.

These preconditions were rapidly fulfilled to demonstrate the IR's seriousness and goodwill to the United States, with the underlying hope of avoiding future constraints (like relinquishing missile and drone capabilities) and potentially gaining concessions on 'peaceful' nuclear technology. To manage domestic and regional public opinion regarding these 'heroic compromises,' the IR orchestrated significant attention on the 'indirect' format of the negotiations, presenting this as a crucial and 'prestigious' matter. The regime aimed to downplay the fundamental strategic shift and its perceived humiliating retreat, concealing its inherently subordinate position in these negotiations despite its prior aggressive rhetoric. They later boastfully will claim that nothing had been imposed upon them and that the IR was the victor in these 'indirect' discussions. However, Trump's direct announcement of the negotiations' form disrupted these calculations, negating the possibility of indirect talks. This forced the IR to defend its claims about 'indirect negotiations,' which were intended to provide a minimal facade for its power assertions, even resorting to convoluted and sophistical interpretations of 'indirect negotiations.'[7]

Beyond the regime's propaganda regarding the negotiation format for domestic and regional consumption, the recent 'heroic flexibility' extends beyond previous understandings. The context and progression of events suggest potential future scenarios for a reconfiguration of the IR's relationship with the West and a reassessment of Iran's position in the global market. For instance, the official announcement that the IR and its Supreme Leader have no objections to future U.S. investments in Iran's economy[8] signifies a substantial shift.

The IR's consistently aggressive posture in the Middle East, coupled with strong anti-U.S. imperialism rhetoric, has obscured the more critical reality of the Iranian regime's subordinate position in the fluid dynamics between global power centers. Recent developments in Syria and Lebanon provide significant evidence for this, suggesting that the IR's function has been to advance certain proxy battles (primarily on behalf of Russia) in the Middle East as long as the power dynamics allowed. These proxy conflicts have contributed to the perpetuation of a 'Global War Regime' and 'militarized accumulation,' while simultaneously strengthening Israel's capacity for aggressive expansion. However, the prolonged nature of this proxy role and the self-aggrandizement of the IR's rulers have led to a perceived (pseudo-)agency for the Iranian regime in global and regional power relations, a perception that has, in fact, benefited both Western and Eastern centers of power.

Acknowledging the IR's subordinate status in global power relations does not diminish the devastating consequences of its regional interventions for the people of the Middle East, nor does it absolve the IR's rulers of their direct responsibility for these disasters. The role of a proxy power in the region has been facilitated by the military-ideological ambitions and political-economic interests of the IR's rulers. The alignment of these roles with the interests of the ruling classes in both 'metropolitan and peripheral' states has necessitated a certain degree of power and privileges for the Iranian regime. Furthermore, in a multipolar global order, the ability of states to maneuver within the rivalries of imperial power centers has expanded the scope of these powers and

privileges, transforming the IR into a regional sub-imperialist power (see appendix).

The advancement of 'proxy wars' by a regional power like the IR is merely the most visible aspect of its 'proxy roles,' overshadowing their broader functions. The 'proxy roles' of a regional power generally contribute to the reproduction of the entire system underpinning the global order. For instance, the IR, as a sub-imperialist power, has facilitated the realization of global power relations regionally, thereby contributing to the continuity of the global order, despite its limited ability to determine global macro-relations. Beyond aiding the expansion of the 'Global War Regime' and 'militarized accumulation,'[9] the IR's most significant role in maintaining the global order has been to perpetuate mechanisms of oppression over the subjugated masses within this order. This has been achieved through consistent repression within Iran and the transnational extension of these repressive measures. The ultimate aim of this repression is to impede the development of critical consciousness and anti-capitalist collective subjectivity among individuals and groups. This is evident in the continuous suppression of political currents (especially leftists) and progressive social movements, alongside the creation of reactionary tendencies and movements.

This aspect of the IR's sub-imperialist functions in maintaining global order can be summarized in two interconnected elements: (a) preventing the formation of class consciousness and suppressing progressive political forces and social movements, thereby bolstering limited and even reactionary collective tendencies; and (b) obstructing both the mental and material possibilities for solidarity among the oppressed, whether within the country or transnationally in the Middle East.

2. Where you have power, be ruthless: kill and intimidate!

How has the IR managed to conceal its overarching function in assisting the reproduction of the capitalist order and imperialist relations? Primarily through the long-standing pursuit of proxy wars in the region, ideologically framed as a struggle against Western powers, specifically as anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism. The aggressive rhetoric, slogans, and actions of the IR's rulers towards Western powers, along with their sustained opposition to the Israeli state (a key imperial stronghold in the Middle East), have provided sufficient material for this concealment. Notably, in recent years, leftist forces (both aligned with and independent of the IR) have also promoted an anti-imperialist and heroic interpretation of the IR's foreign policy. Understandably, these claims have resonated with Arab opponents of Zionism in the Middle East. Interestingly, mainstream media in both Western and Eastern societies have facilitated this concealment by endorsing and amplifying the IR's propaganda.

Consequently, the protracted political-ideological polarization surrounding the IR's relationship with the West (or the Western-dominated global order) has obscured their fundamental affinities and mutual benefits. Furthermore, the entrenchment of this image, coupled with the IR's global position, has made 'opposition to the West' a fundamental aspect of the IR's identity. This has deepened the IR's rulers' reliance on this image. Historically, this identity component has significantly influenced the IR's governance style, serving to project internal contradictions and crises onto external factors and to establish a 'perpetual state of emergency' to justify and expand militarization. The expansion of militarization within this state of emergency has fostered the growth of military-economic complexes (led by the Revolutionary Guards), increased the political influence of the military oligarchy, and led to the unrestrained growth of the repressive security apparatus.

This context explains the IR's frantic and chaotic efforts to maintain its established image (especially domestically and regionally) while facing its inevitable subordinate position following a strategic shift in global imperialist relations and potentially standing on the verge of a significant deal with the West under Trump. This struggle is most evident in the obsessive focus on whether negotiations with the United States are direct or indirect, a farce that became particularly ridiculous after

Trump's announcement of direct talks. However, this should not distract from the fact that the IR's rulers are (a) persistently using their extensive propaganda to maintain the regime's ideological unity around national sovereignty and anti-imperialism, and (b) intensifying public intimidation through security and judicial apparatuses[10] and increased executions to remind the oppressed masses of their absolute power and brutality.

The conventional image of the IR presented by mainstream media—centered on "opposition to the West" and Shia fundamentalism—not only reflects the regime's claims but also serves additional functions. Given the role of these outlets in shaping public opinion, this representation has effectively concealed the inherent contradictions within the IR's "opposition to the West" by obscuring its broader roles as a proxy power facilitating the reproduction of the global order. One consequence of this has been the reaction of the IR's opponents and dissatisfied masses: facing the disastrous outcomes of the IR's constant opposition to Western imperialism and Israel, and in despair from their prolonged struggles, a significant portion of the oppressed population has begun to praise the free market, Western powers, and the Israeli regime. Undoubtedly, the transformation of the consciousness and agency of the oppressed in alignment with the foundations of the existing global order represents the most significant service a proxy power like the IR can offer in the reproduction of that order.

However, the subjugation of the oppressed within Iran has never relied solely on ideology and propaganda. State repression in Iran has consistently included overt and direct aspects, such as economic repression and the imposition of severe livelihood crises on the lower classes, depriving them of essential means of survival—an application of "necropolitics" by the IR's rulers. Furthermore, state repression is carried out through public intimidation, particularly through daily executions of prisoners, both political opponents and social offenders. This explains the noticeable increase in executions by the IR's judicial system amidst the rulers' claims that negotiations with Trump would lead to peace for Iranians.[11]

The human rights news agency HRANA reported a significant increase in executions, with at least 28 prisoners executed in the first five days of a recent week,[12] averaging five executions per day. Amnesty International's annual report[13] (April 8, 2024) indicated that while global executions were at their highest since 2015, the Iranian regime was responsible for 64% of all recorded executions (excluding countries with unavailable reliable data). The report stated that Iran's executions in 2024 reached 972, a 14% increase from the previous year, and highlighted the regime's use of the death penalty against political opponents, protesters, and ethnic or minority groups.

Executions are not a novel phenomenon under the IR; they are deeply ingrained in the regime's history. The use of executions for public intimidation has a grim history dating back to the early years after the 1979 Revolution, with periods of fluctuation. However, since the middle of the Jina Uprising and leading up to the negotiations with the West, this practice has re-emerged prominently. The common thread linking the regime's resort to this intimidation mechanism in these historical periods is the fragile state of the IR at those times. A key difference is that public intimidation through executions has now become an automated means of regulating political pressure in society to an unprecedented degree.[14] The IR's structural reliance on killing its citizens, its death-centered existence, is more evident than ever, indicating an escalated level of fragility, though not necessarily implying imminent collapse.

Alongside direct public intimidation, the Iranian regime continues to employ social repression through strict measures, such as cracking down on women's dress code, to assert its authority. The threatened implementation of the "Hijab Law," passed after the Jina Uprising, promises more severe crackdowns to revert society to pre-uprising norms. However, some high-ranking officials have

stated that its enforcement has been suspended “for national security concerns.” This threat gains deeper significance when viewed alongside warnings from Fars News Agency (close to the Revolutionary Guards) about the potential for mass unrest if negotiations with the United States fail, and Tehran’s municipality’s announcement[15] of installing approximately 15,000 surveillance cameras. These developments suggest that the IR’s “heroic flexibility” towards its “foreign enemy” is accompanied by an intensified “iron fist” policy against the “internal enemy”—the oppressed masses.

Conclusions:

The intensified reliance on “public intimidation” and the increased executions underscore that the IR’s rulers, while facing various political opponents, rightly perceive the oppressed masses as their primary adversaries. Recent events have demonstrated the IR’s readiness to negotiate with its so-called “sworn foreign enemies” from a weaker position, making significant concessions (abandoning proxy forces). Simultaneously, the IR’s rulers show no flexibility towards the oppressed masses (“internal enemies”), intensifying the “iron fist” policy and using their power over life and death as a tool for public intimidation. This reaffirms that for the IR’s rulers, “the main enemy is at home.”

The IR has played specific roles in the reproduction of the global order, shaped by historical trajectories and the political-economic interests of its rulers, defining its fundamental characteristics. The overarching goal behind the IR regime’s complex maneuvers, including negotiations with the United States, is the preservation and reproduction of the state itself. The IR strives for survival like a living organism, employing all means to ensure this goal, a desperate endeavor now more evident in its brutality. Similarly, the global capitalist system struggles for survival, with its efforts becoming increasingly aggressive and destructive. While the focus on survival is inherent in any state institution, within the IR, this has been sanctified as an unconditional principle[16] since Ayatollah Khomeini’s declaration: “The preservation of the [Islamic] regime is the most important obligation.” This religious legitimization removes any boundaries from the IR’s survival efforts, partly explaining its reckless use of propaganda and repression, its conciliatory foreign policy coupled with uncompromising domestic policy, and its disregard for human life, confronting opponents solely with death-oriented mechanisms.

From this perspective, the justice-seeking movement for the victims of the IR regime and the “No to Executions on Tuesdays Campaign”[17] represent significant achievements deserving of strong support and solidarity. This support is crucial not only morally (defending the right to life) but also strategically, as a form of resistance against the IR regime, targeting the very foundation of its repression and existence as a death-centered entity.

Appendix:

IR as a Sub-Imperialist Power

The Iranian state has been described as a sub-imperialist power in some analytical and political writings. While a detailed theoretical discussion is beyond the scope of the text, the following outlines the justification for using this term.

Despite the inherent tendency of capital to expand beyond national borders, the historical development of capitalism involved establishing and solidifying nation-states to overcome pre-capitalist forces and mechanisms. Since the rise of capitalism, nation-states have been responsible for ensuring the conditions necessary for their national capital to prosper. This occurred in two main ways: Domestically: Primarily through controlling labor and suppressing any resistance from it. Externally: By facilitating access for national capital to limited global resources and markets. Consequently, the historical development and continuation of the capitalist system have resulted

from the interaction between the internal/national functions of capitalist states and the unavoidable competition and conflicts among them. If we understand global imperialist relations as the power dynamics essential for the continuation of the capitalist order, structured by national borders and competing states, then these imperialist relations cannot maintain their global reach without the active involvement and mediation of national states, especially regional powers. Therefore, when we specifically identify global power centers (the imperialists), we can justifiably consider regional/middle powers (like Iran) as sub-imperialist states because the global power centers rely on these regional powers to pursue and advance their objectives. Historical evidence shows how countries such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and even the United Arab Emirates have acted as sub-imperialists in their surrounding regions. This is evident through: The ideological, political, and military aspects of their interventions and aggressive influence in various regional countries. More importantly, economic factors such as exporting capital (or attracting capital from major global centers) and establishing various means for economic exploitation.

To validate this claim, an analysis of the economic roles and functions of the Iranian regime in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen would be necessary, along with similar analyses[18] for Saudi Arabia's, Turkey's, and the UAE's involvements in their respective regions. In simpler terms, while there are major global powers (imperialists), these powers rely on regional actors like Iran to help them maintain their influence and the existing global capitalist system. These regional actors, therefore, act as "sub-imperialists," promoting their own interests and exerting influence in their regions, which in turn supports the broader goals of the dominant global powers. This is seen not just in military actions but also in economic activities that facilitate exploitation and maintain the existing power structure.

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[1] According to a report by BBC Persian, Pete Hegseth, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, in response to a question about the message conveyed by the deployment of B-2 strategic bombers to Iran, said: "The decision regarding this is up to them…. These bombers are excellent tools and carry a message for everyone."

[2] After the Russian parliament (Duma) approved the comprehensive strategic treaty of political, military, and economic cooperation with Iran, Andrei Rudenko, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, told Duma representatives that, according to this treaty, in the event of an attack on one of the two countries, the other party is not obligated to provide military support. (State news agency TASS, April 8). See also: Newsweek: *Russia Says It Won't Have to Defend Iran in Win for Trump*. Apr 08, 2025.

[3] *Iran is withdrawing its military forces from Yemen*; Source: Radio Zamaneh, April 4, 2025.

[4] Reuters: *Islamic resistance groups in Iraq have expressed their readiness for disarmament*. (Quoted from Radio Zamaneh, April 7, 2025)

[5] The term *heroic flexibility* was first introduced in 2015 by the religious leader of the IR to describe the nuclear agreement with global powers, which represented a strategic retreat for Iran's leaders. Since then, it has been applied in similar contexts.

[6] Times of Israel: *Most Hezbollah sites in southern Lebanon handed over to Lebanese army*. April 12, 2025.

[7] For instance, Hossein Mousavian, a former member of Iran's nuclear negotiation team and a current researcher at Princeton University, wrote: 'Both sides are correct. There is no contradiction.

… It seems that on Saturday in Oman, Mr. Araqchi and Mr. Witkoff will initially start negotiations indirectly, and if the initial atmosphere is positive, after an hour or two, direct talks between the representatives of the two countries will begin.' [Source: Rokna News Agency, April 8, 2025].

[8] Pezeshkian, the President of Iran: 'The Leader has no objections to American investments in Iran.' (Source: Radio Zamaneh, April 9, 2025)

[9] The concept *militarized accumulation* was first developed by William I. Robinson. See: Robinson W. I. (2014): *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press.

[10] In Iran under IR, the judiciary has never been independent. However, in the past two decades, alongside the deepening antagonistic divide between the IR-regime and the oppressed, which has been accompanied by the expansion of militarization and the security apparatus of the regime, the judiciary has disgracefully become an extension of the security forces.

[11] The message from Major General Baqeri, the Chief of the Iranian Armed Forces, delivered by in front of Persepolis for Iranian New Year, serves as a striking example in this regard. (Farhikhtegan News, April 7, 2025)

[12] Hrana: "*In Iran, at least 28 prisoners have been executed in the past six days*." Source: Radio Zamaneh, April 10, 2025.

[13] Amnesty International Global Report: Death Sentences and Executions 2024.

[14] The Islamic Republic, on the verge of forced retreats in its dealings with the international system, resorts to intensifying domestic repression, including a significant increase in the number of executions. The repetition of this pattern in the current situation may somewhat remind one of another historical event: the massacre of political prisoners in 1988. Shortly after the IR accepted the UN resolution for peace (Resolution 598) to end the eight-year war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic secretly executed thousands of political opponents (leftists) in Iranian prisons. This crime occurred just before the ruling authorities began the voluntary establishment of a neoliberal model for the Iranian economy (or its aggressive imposition on the underprivileged). A significant difference is that while the rulers at that historical moment carefully concealed the mass killings of political opponents from public view, today they loudly announce the daily executions (which mainly involve social offenders, particularly from minority groups) in the media. Whereas the primary goal of the 1988 massacre was the physical elimination of opponents, the main objective of the recent daily executions is to intimidate the entire society.

[15] According to the CEO of the Tehran Municipality Traffic Control Company (in his interview with ISNA on April 8, 2025), "One of the municipality's urgent projects is to complete the video monitoring system and use artificial intelligence equipment to detect violations that lead to accidents and illegal activities. For this reason, this year, fifteen thousand cameras are set to be added to this system."

[16] The approach of "sanctified targeting" is similarly observable in the political sphere of Israel, particularly within Netanyahu's coalition government: where the extremist right-wingers in Israel justify any means, both in thought and action, to preserve the state of Israel and achieve the sacred goal of a Greater Israel.

[17] This campaign, despite all the tangible threats and security pressures over the past year, has involved a large number of prisons in Iran and a broad array of political and non-political prisoners. (Telegram page of the campaign "No to Execution Tuesdays Campaign.")

[18] For example, this website contains numerous well-documented reports that provide empirical data regarding the regional interventions of Middle Eastern sub-imperialist powers: https://migration-control.info/en/