

Scott Ritter: Why Iran-U.S. Talks REALLY Failed

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#Nima

We had J.D. Vance participating in TPUSA, which was confronted by some people talking about your support for genocide. And J.D. Vance wants to, I think he wants to be the 28th presidential candidate for the Republicans. How do you see the way he was negotiating with the Iranians? Because they said from the Iranian side—I talked with Professor Miranda—he said right in the middle of the night, you know, it was late at night, he decided to go to the United States, even though he had agreed before for the negotiations to continue until Sunday. But he decided to get out. What was that, Scott? What was that? And he was calling Washington over and over. He talked with Benjamin Netanyahu. Benjamin Netanyahu said he was in direct contact with him because he wanted to report what had happened. What is that?

#Scott

Well, it's a reality that in the Trump administration, there's no such thing as an independent negotiator. The only voice that counts is Donald Trump. This isn't Richard Nixon giving Henry Kissinger, you know, permission to run off and solve problems and then report back. In the past, presidents were briefed on it. You know, Kissinger had great latitude. J.D. Vance had zero latitude—zero latitude. The fact that there was almost an Islamabad manner of understanding is solely because of the Iranians, who came in prepared, very well prepared. And they were able to, you know, take whatever limited American input there was and immediately turn it into something. They were ready to move. It's a shame that we blew that opportunity.

But J.D. Vance wasn't there to, in my opinion, he wasn't there to make a deal. He was there to make it impossible for a deal to take place. The reason he left at midnight is because the Iranians were doing everything they could to make a deal. The Iranians were ready. They're like, let's get this thing done. Here it is. You got a problem? Here's a solution. You got a problem? Here's a solution. We're ready to do what it takes to get this thing done. And Vance wasn't allowed to close the deal, so he had to leave. Because this can't be—if J.D. Vance closed the deal, if there was a successful

negotiation, this could only be interpreted as an Iranian victory, that the United States met Iran in Islamabad, and at the end of the day, the Iranian ten points served as the foundation of this agreement.

That's politically unacceptable. So what had to happen is we had to go in there, engage with the Iranians, and then declare the negotiations over because of Iranian intransigence—back out. Now that gives room for Donald Trump to go through the political theater of a blockade that is fake. And it allows him to declare victory, which he has done. And now he can go in and close the deal and say it only happened because of the great strength and resolution that I showed in showing the Iranians who's the boss of the Strait of Hormuz. But now we've solved that, so now we're going to have reconstruction—a great source of revenue, however he wants to spin it. But J.D. Vance just wasn't allowed to succeed.

#Scott

I don't think, you know, some people say that's because of Trump, you know, Trump.

#Scott

I think some people said it was about Trump trying to sabotage Vance. I don't think it's that. I just think it was about Trump making sure that, at the end of the day, the failure of the negotiations couldn't be put on his table. It had to be put on somebody's table. And it leaves room for him to ride in and save the day, which I think you're going to see tomorrow. I think tomorrow is going to be an interesting day diplomatically.

#Nima

Today we've learned that the Pakistani Army Chief, Asim Munir, has arrived in Tehran with a senior political and security delegation. He's giving a message from Washington to the Iranians. Do you think that this time around, as you mentioned, the Iranians were there—they went to Pakistan totally prepared? You look at the delegation, they had everything: economic, legal, political, everything. They had everything there to do everything correctly. But how do you see it if something happens with the negotiations, with the talks? Do you see the same happening on the part of the United States? We see good delegations having each and every dimension that a delegation needs to negotiate, to talk.

#Scott

I don't know if we're capable of that anymore. I mean, I'd like to believe we could, but I don't know if we're capable of that anymore. What I see is that we were intellectually lazy. We let the Iranians do all the hard work, and we used the Islamabad draft MOU as the foundation. It's been sent back and there's been some tinkering with it. I think, you know, when we meet, we're going to use that

document as the foundation. Look, I would love if we sent in a senior diplomat who was backed by, you know, all the experts in the U.S. community coming together to do the same thing that the Iranians did. We don't have that kind of capability anymore. The State Department's been gutted. You know, Donald Trump's approach to national security and foreign policy formulation and implementation is to remove all the middlemen.

So we don't have technical experts anymore. We don't have people that are singularly focused on this issue from a policy perspective. So I think the team we send in is going to be a politically motivated team there to save Donald Trump's presidency. And it's about spin. You know, Iran has done all the technical heavy lifting, and the United States is—I think we're just going to send another team of political spinmeisters. Let's see. We'll see what it looks like. I think that the Pakistani defense minister was also there because the Iranians were concerned the U.S. was going to shoot them down, that the U.S. was going to do something stupid. And I think the Pakistanis had to reassure the Iranians that they're not being set up for a U.S. trap.

#Nima

That's so strange. Publishing articles that this is an opportunity to kill Iranian negotiators—it's unbelievable. You have to be totally out of your mind to suggest that. The guy who wrote that article—nobody would believe any sort of negotiations if something like that happens. This is the Israeli sort of agenda because they have been killing and assassinating negotiators. The United States cannot be like this. I don't believe the United States is like this.

#Scott

This administration is unapologetic about everything. They're capable of anything. I mean, that's just where we are. You know, this administration has modeled itself after the Israelis in terms of behavior. So, I wish—I mean, if we had had this conversation six months ago, I would have said the same thing you did: that's not how America operates. I can't say that anymore. I mean, look, Donald Trump killed Qasem Soleimani. The American people still don't know the truth about that murder.

You know, this was a guy who was acting at the request of regional players to, you know, create peace opportunities. He was on a mission of peace, of diplomacy, which is why he traveled openly in the way that he did. And we murdered him as he was trying to, you know, coordinate nonviolent solutions to problems that previously had only been, you know, sought to be solved violently. And we murdered the guy. Trump murdered him. And so we are fully capable of doing Israeli-type actions.

#Nima

You mentioned, Scott, it seems that still in the minds of those people who are the main decision-makers in the United States and Israel, this government is seen as an ideological government. They

are called radical, and nobody sees the pragmatic sort of attitude of the government in Iran. I would say there is nothing radical about the government. If you know the people, if you talk to the people, if you see the way they're seeing the conflict, the war so far—look at this war, more than 40 days of war—there is nothing radical about them, nothing ideological. They didn't attack civilians because on the first day, you know, a primary school was attacked by fighter jets. They didn't go there because they know what they want. They know what is practical for them. And they fail to understand that in the United States, in my opinion, and in Israel as well.

#Scott

No, look, we're dealing with people who are incapable of embracing the truth. Why did the Iranian regime survive the assassination attempt on Ali Khamenei? In the West, we think of it as a government of extreme theocrats. The Ayatollahs are in charge. But they're not. Iran's a constitutional republic. The president's in charge. You know, read the Constitution. The president has a lot of power. Even when you get into these various councils and committees, the president is the chair of these. He's the man that's sitting at the head of the table. Yes, the supreme leader is there, but the supreme leader is there from a religious standpoint, you know, to focus on ensuring that policies conform, you know, to the Islamic foundation of the nation.

But the Constitution drives everything. Even the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council are there to ensure, you know, constitutional conformity. This is a system that's been in play for five decades, and it works. And the Iranian people, by and large, believe in it. There are abuses of power. Of course there are. But, you know, for people to say this is a regime of mad, radical Ayatollahs means you don't know anything about Iran. You don't understand how Iran works. You don't understand how Iran functions. The total disrespect you show to the Majlis and the whole concept of democracy, democratic representation, et cetera.

And so, you know, we can't allow people who truly know Iran to be advising the president, because the only way these policies work is if you believe the underlying misinformation about Iran and its system of government. But there's nothing radical about Iran. I think what we've done is we've empowered a more conservative element that is distrustful of the West, that might be more inclined to pivot away from the West and engage more fruitfully with the East. But even then, remember, the people who are talking about the pivot—it's not as though they're sold out to China and Russia. These are Iranian patriots.

We don't respect the fact that the people who are governing Iran today are Iranian patriots, first and foremost. That they're looking out for what's best for Iran, that one of the reasons why they've rejected the policies of Rouhani and Zarif is because the West has betrayed Iran so much over time. The West can't be trusted. And so they're starting to question those who believe we should give the West one more chance. To do what? To betray Iran again. So we in the West, we don't want to legitimize the legitimate concerns of these more conservative Iranians, so we radicalize them instead. We make anything that's opposition to the United States and the West become radical,

radicalized. And then we tend to ignore the patriotic aspects of these people, and we call them Islamists, radical Islamists, fundamentalists, extremists, when the reality is most of them aren't.

None of them are extreme. I mean, I believe that Iran is a nation of great faith, and I believe that people who gravitate to positions of leadership, because it is an Islamic republic, are people whose beliefs conform with the vision of an Islamic republic. But that doesn't make them Islamists or fundamentalists or extremists in the way that we use those terms to define Wahhabism, Salafism, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and things of that nature. In the West, we're incapable of discerning differences. Maybe we're capable of it; we just don't want to, because the truth is complex and we want simplicity. And so we embrace lies. We embrace inaccurate narratives because it's easier to do so, because we're not trying to win a debate about the reality of Iran with Iranians.

You know, it's not like I have to convince you. I have to convince the idiot American across the street from me, and the idiot American down the road from me, and the idiot American down here — people who are ignorant about it. So the narrative I create doesn't have to be fact-based or conform to reality. It just has to be something that can be consumed readily by an ignorant American public. That's got to be frustrating for you and the people of Iran who are saying, "Well, wait a minute. We really exist. There's a truth here. There's a reality here." Sadly, in America, we don't care about your truth or your reality. We only care about how we can spin data so that it can be consumed politically here in the United States.

#Nima

Part of the negotiations, Scott, since day one, Iran said on all fronts there has to be, you know, they have to put an end to the war on all fronts. One of them is with Hezbollah in Lebanon. And Israel had the first, you know, direct talks with the Lebanese government. But the outcome of that seems to be they're going to end up having a civil war in Lebanon if they go in that direction. What is your understanding of that?

#Scott

My understanding is that Israel currently occupies 22% of Lebanon. So any Lebanese government that negotiates with the Israelis without recognizing that isn't a Lebanese government. They're an adjunct of Israel. And this is the fact that, you know, the Lebanese constitution, the vagaries of the French-imposed system of guaranteeing the presidency to a Christian and the prime ministership to a Sunni Muslim — that means that there's no real democracy.

It means that Lebanon is governed by factions, and the Christian faction and the Sunni faction, at least as they are represented in government, are factions that have sold out to Israel. They are controlled by Israel. So when we speak of Israel negotiating with the Lebanese government, it's Israel negotiating with itself. The Lebanese government is incapable of doing that. The notion that Hezbollah, which derives its legitimacy from the very concept of resistance — resistance to Israeli

occupation — that Israel can't defeat Hezbollah, so they're turning to the Lebanese to say, "You have to disarm Hezbollah." So the Lebanese army, instead of confronting the foreign entity that occupies 22% of their soil, is slaughtering their people, is now supposed to, what, turn on Hezbollah?

That isn't going to happen. The army won't obey those orders because the army understands what the consequences will be. The army cannot defeat Hezbollah in a stand-up fight. And if they try, it will become a civil war. And when it becomes a civil war, you know, suddenly the politics that constrain Hezbollah will no longer exist. And you'll see a different Hezbollah. Hezbollah is more powerful than the Lebanese army, and they're more powerful than the Israeli army when it comes to defending Lebanese soil. And Hezbollah will not be defeated. What we're seeing right now is just a game being played by the United States and Lebanon to create perceptions. How this will impact the final peace negotiations, again, I can't speak for the Iranians.

I would never seek to speak for the Iranians, and I can't speak for the United States because I'm not in a position to do so. But I do believe that if I were an American negotiator, I could prevail upon the Iranians to recognize the fact that the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict cannot be lumped into the current conflict between Israel, the United States, and Iran. These are two separate issues. That doesn't mean we're going to give carte blanche to Israel to act, but we have to recognize the reality that we're not going to solve the Lebanese problem today, and therefore we must push it off under a different format. We can extend the ceasefire. We can seek a permanent cessation of hostilities between the United States and Iran and extend the ceasefire, understanding that.

You know, we can't guarantee outcomes here. I think that's a responsible way. First of all, that is a format that doesn't require Iran to stop funding Hezbollah, which Iran isn't going to do. So I think by treating those as separate—and same thing with the Houthis—I mean, there are still the unresolved issues between Iran, the Houthis, and Saudi Arabia that, you know, that conflict hasn't come to an end yet. And I still think that I could sit down with the Iranians and say, we have to treat Yemen as a separate issue as well. We need to solve our fundamental problem, all right? But these issues are far more complex. They involve players that are outside the framework of our conflict.

And again, you know, we need to come up with an effective mechanism of continuing engagement to resolve these conflicts without... And I would tell the Iranians, without forestalling your ability to move forward, I want sanctions lifted against Iran. I would say that as an American negotiator. I want those sanctions lifted. We can't lift those sanctions if we're tying in Yemen and Lebanon, because now these problems aren't going to be solved overnight. If we're tying them in, that means this thing's going to drag out forever. We need to conclude our problems so that you can get sanctions lifted, so we can move on with doing whatever we have to do in the region. And we need to agree that we're all going to come in.

Now, maybe we can talk about frameworks. Maybe we can get Chinese mediators. Maybe we can do some things about this to change the dynamic. Because if I were the Iranians, I'd say, so you're just proposing we continue to do what we did before that didn't work and only led to Israeli attacks and

American attacks on Yemen and Lebanon. So there would be—I think it would be wise to talk about bringing in, you know, other parties to facilitate these negotiations: the Chinese, the Russians, et cetera, to de-emphasize the American—well, I mean, how stupid is it to have the United States, you know, together with Lebanon and Israel to negotiate the future of Hezbollah? I mean, it's just ridiculous framing. Anyways, that's that.

#Nima

Hezbollah is not Hamas. Hezbollah is something beyond that. Everybody knows the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

#Scott

Hezbollah defeated the Israelis in 2000. They fought the Israelis to a standstill in 2006. And they're beating the Israelis today. So, you know, yeah, Hezbollah is Hezbollah. It's not going away anytime soon.

#Nima

Scott, I think the war in the Middle East has somehow changed the whole calculations on the part of Russia, China, and Europe, because after the war in Ukraine, which was a total blow to the European economy, they have been suffering a lot because of the war in Ukraine. And then the war in the Middle East came along. And you see how they are suffering as time goes by with this war in the Middle East, from what is happening in the Strait of Hormuz, for example. And how do you see the way Donald Trump tried to put pressure on Saudi Arabia? This is the first time I've seen the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia say, no, we're going to decide about our policy. Our policy will be based on our calculation, not the calculation of the Trump administration. I have never seen Saudi Arabia talking this way. And how do you see the influence, or the influence that the war has had on the calculation of GCC countries?

#Scott

I mean, we have a study in contrast. We have Saudi Arabia that appears to be more reality-based in saying, you know, we get to make these decisions. The United Arab Emirates were purely, you know, a tool of the United States. I mean, they sent a senior delegation to China to try and put pressure on China to drop their support for Iran. And I've never seen more public humiliation in my entire life than when the Chinese put the UAE delegation in its place. You don't tell the dragon what to do. You know, the reality is that the world has changed, and the United States can no longer project itself as this, you know, superpower, the last remaining superpower, unchecked guarantor of security that nobody would dare challenge because of our overwhelming military and economic strength.

And now we have today the reality that Iran successfully stood up to the United States militarily, and the United States hasn't broken them economically, that the world is a far more complicated, nuanced place, with strengths having been accrued in China, Russia, and elsewhere that the United States can't overcome. You know, the Gulf Arab nations, which had for now, what, four decades, you know, bought into the Carter Doctrine, which was, you know, America guarantees security, but then you guarantee your foreign policies will align with the United States.

#Scott

You know, there were...

#Scott

There we go. They're waking up to the fact that the United States no longer gets to dictate outcomes, and it can no longer provide guarantees. And so they have to adjust to this. Some adjust more rapidly than others. I think Saudi Arabia is starting to see the light, and the United Arab Emirates continues to wallow in its own ignorance.

#Nima

Let's assume they get something from the negotiations between Iran and the United States. Is that going to be a new era of cooperation between the United States and other countries?

#Scott

The United States is incapable of cooperating with other countries under Donald Trump. You know, so I think you're going to see that this negotiation is the exception, not the rule. The only way the United States is going to come up with significant policy deviations that can be called, you know, trending towards the normal is by defeat. If the United States isn't challenged, then we will continue to do what we've been doing—the path of least resistance, et cetera—under the belief that, you know, America can get away with literally anything. But as we are challenged and as we fail, we have to adapt. And I think Iran is the first of what will probably be many adaptations that will take place over the course of the next several years. But this isn't the United States learning how to get along with its neighbors; it's the United States being compelled by the weight of its failures to readjust.