

# Mark Sleboda: Fake Deal? Trump's Secret Envoys Fail

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## #Nima

And what is amazing to me is that the whole concept of the negotiations, or not negotiations, the messages between the two sides, is based on the first point. The first point is putting an end to the war on all fronts, with Lebanon mentioned by the Iranian foreign minister last night. He had an interview on Iranian state TV. He mentioned that, and the United States repeated it, while Israel just moments ago said they have no commitment. They're not prepared to give any sort of commitment to what's going on between Israel and Lebanon. And as soon as they feel some sort of threat, they're going to do the same — they're going to attack, they're going to bomb, they're going to do it. This is the main issue. This is the issue of Lebanon. The second part is this, first and foremost: it seems that the United States has accepted that Iran would charge some sort of — they don't call it a toll — it's going to be a fee, administrative fee or whatever, service fee. Service fee, service fee. Yeah, exactly.

## #Mark

Environmental services, guidance services.

## #Nima

Exactly.

## #Mark

It's a protection racket, right? I mean, let's be honest.

## #Nima

Yeah, this is the Strait of Hormuz. When it comes to the other important points, which were the Iranian sanctions, they're not going to talk about it in the first round. It's going to be later on. The Iranian nuclear program is not part of this, what's going on right now. It's going to be later on.

American troops withdrawing from the region is going to be later on. And within 60 days, I would assume that it's going to be 60 plus 60 plus 60. And as we've seen with the negotiations between Russia and the United States, what is your take on what's going on?

## **#Mark**

Okay, so, I mean, I don't think it's any surprise. Color me skeptical. You know, I'm unapologetically a cynic in both the classical and the modern sense when it comes to such things. I'll refer you to actually one of the few decent pieces of journalism by CNN I've seen in recent years, where they put out a clip in the middle of this week of the 37 times that Trump has said that they're about to make a deal, a deal is imminent, or we have a deal, since the ceasefire began. And by the end of the week, it was up to 39, as even the CNN bubblehead noted. So we don't have a real good track record here.

And of course, when we're saying a deal, I mean, first of all, that is such a diminutive, derogatory word that Trump, of course, loves using, referring to agreements reached between states. And if this were actually to lead to that, then that would be, you know, properly thought of as a treaty, right? You know, the idea that it has some type of international legal—such as there is international law, which admittedly is debatable—but *gravitas*, right? And consequences and repercussions. Not that the U.S. has any problem tearing up international treaties and agreements when they're reached, even when secured, confirmed in U.N. Security Council resolutions, which are supposed to be binding international law, and Trump's own ripping up of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The last deal reached with Iran, you know, by Obama and then ripped up by Trump at the beginning of his first administration, which, of course, ultimately has led us to this point where Iran, whatever they might claim anyway, any deal that, quote unquote, is reached and at least an attempt is made by the United States to adhere to as a result of it—which I'm extremely skeptical about—but would objectively put the U.S. in a worse position than it was under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, given Iran, certainly in the total geopolitical situation with regards to increased Iranian power and influence in the region at the end of this.

Now, whatever they—first of all, the Iranians and the Americans, as far as we know, are not actually meeting each other, and that needs to be pointed out. They are exchanging messages, as far as I can tell, usually even that through intermediaries—the Pakistanis, possibly the Iranians, the Omanis, and the Qataris as well may be playing some role in that. And a number of other countries—Turkey, Egypt—are kind of on the fringes of all of this. Certainly, Trump loves to throw their names in there out of the blue occasionally when he's making posts that seem to indicate some type of common Middle Eastern or Arab consensus, although that's not clear.

The main problem here is that, first of all, we've had two major incidents of military conflict, if you want to call them skirmishes. I think the U.S.-Iranian exchange went beyond the level of a skirmish that occurred during the last week, right, in the run-up to this. And the first one was between Iran

and Israel. And this is very important for— that is very important for any possibility of any final agreement, any final deal being reached. Because Israel has, during the entire time of this ceasefire, denied a previous agreement that was reached between the U.S. and Iran through the Pakistanis, which the Pakistanis have confirmed that that ceasefire was supposed to extend to Lebanon as well, and Gaza for that matter.

And, of course, the Israelis never accepted that. And they continued their occupation and ethnic cleansing of southern Lebanon all this time. The most that can be said is that for most of the ceasefire, they refrained from airstrikes on the Lebanese capital of Beirut, even if they were hitting Tyre, Lebanon's second city, the largest city in the south, on a regular basis. So they completely continued operations. Now, they were paying a price for this all along. Hezbollah has very quietly, evidently become quite skilled in the use of drones, particularly fiber-optic drones, the sort of drones that Russia has become a pioneer of for the last couple of years in Ukraine. Just saying.

Wonder how Hezbollah got those drones and that knowledge and training to use them so effectively. So they've been making Israel pay a price, certainly. And that's well reported and complained and whined about in the Israeli press. But at the beginning, or shall I say the end of last week, last weekend, what we saw was Israel shifted and returned to airstrikes on Beirut, specifically the Dahiya neighborhood, which is historically a Hezbollah stronghold, supposedly. And that evidently was a red line that Iran was no longer willing to accept. And they responded with strikes on Israel. And then Israel responded with some rather tepid strikes back on Iran.

And that was the end of it, with Iran warning that Israel needed to stop its attacks on Lebanon, and Israel angrily responding that they wouldn't, punctuating it just hours later with more airstrikes on Tyre in southern Lebanon. Now, while Iran seemed to set a new strategic equation, which has never existed before — which is that if Israel attacks Lebanon, really Hezbollah, but Lebanon — then that is not acceptable to Iran, and Iran will strike back at Israel. That has not happened before. That is a new strategic equation. And Israel even angrily talked about it in exactly those terms, saying they would not accept that new equation. First of all, it tells us that Iran is feeling their oats.

They're feeling strength that they're willing to implement this now, with a U.S. small armada still sitting somewhere off their coast and with aircraft poised all throughout the Middle East to begin hostilities again. They're obviously feeling extremely confident. It is a change, and it seems to be a somewhat unexpected change. Because as far as the U.S. and Israel are concerned, Hezbollah is a proxy of Iran. And one doesn't go to bat in a tense situation for one's proxy. One throws one's proxy under the bus. At least that's what the U.S. does. The Kurds are a perfect indicator of that, again and again and again. So they're somewhat surprised by Iran stepping up for Hezbollah, for Lebanon, in a way that they never have before.

Now, Iran did threaten Israel that they needed to stop attacks on southern Lebanon, as well as Beirut, and that they would reply if Israel replied and if they continued attacks on Lebanon. Well, Israel did reply on Iran, even if those were somewhat, shall we say, tepid retaliations. And Israel

immediately, within hours, resumed strikes on southern Lebanon. And Iran did not respond again. They let it go, shall we say. So now we know what Iran's real red line is: attacks on Beirut, attacks on the Lebanese capital are the real red line of Iran, beyond which they are attempting to set a new strategic equation to put the shield of their conventional ballistic missile and long-range drone strike deterrent in defense of at least the Lebanese capital.

That is the new reality that is being established. And that's important because that hasn't happened before. Iran has never attacked Israel proactively because Israel attacked Lebanon before, or Hezbollah, however you want to term it. That hasn't happened. So then the U.S. was trumpeting, or Trump personally anyway, was trumpeting that he was sneaking — the U.S. was sneaking tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. They were doing this by going dark, by shutting off their transponders and hugging the Omani coast. Now, supposedly, according to reports that have come out through the New York Times, which means leaks — intentional leaks from the government — they were getting out about two or three tankers a day.

Now, that's not a lot. That is much smaller than, for instance, the 120 or 130 tankers that were transiting the Strait of Hormuz on a daily basis before the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran began. And even significantly less than the average of about 25 tankers that Iran themselves have selectively been letting through after agreeing with them and paying a toll — sorry, not a toll, a service fee. A service fee. It's not a toll. Remember that. Totally not a protection racket. But anyway, it's a relatively small amount. But there does seem to be — and I say seem because there is some evidence of this — right?

And, of course, I don't trust anything that the U.S. or CENTCOM or Trump says, but independent trackers like Kepler, TankerTrackers, and others seem to indicate that some tankers — a number of them — have gotten through. Now, the U.S. is not sending their Navy, right, into the Strait of Hormuz, and that's important to note. What they are doing is providing guidance, which says, you know, they've got their satellites, and occasionally it seems they've put a helicopter or an aircraft in the air around or possibly even in that end of the Strait of Hormuz to, I don't know, provide moral support. I guess that's it. Go for it. Go for it. Come on, come on, come on, come on. It's safe. Come on, come on, come on. Right. You know, we got a bird up there somewhere. We're watching.

## **#Nima**

Right. You know, it seems, I mean, there's no way that Iran didn't know.

## **#Mark**

Right. They have enough radar and other sensors, ways of detecting. It's only a 21-kilometer stretch. So it means that Iran was probably letting a certain amount of ships get through that way. Now, others, they were making occasional examples of. Right. Their fast boats were coming out. They hit them with drones. We saw two more of these during the middle of the week. So they were

being extremely judicious. But none of that takes away from the overall geoeconomic asymmetric leverage that Iran was still holding by, you know, cutting off the vast majority of the normal traffic through the Strait of Hormuz.

Now, at the same time, with regards to the U.S. blockade, the U.S. has been a little bit more vigorous in trying to implement it, attacking a number of third-country, you know, flag-of-convenience flagged ships. And they actually hit a number of ships this week that were crewed by Indians, and one of which they killed three Indians, to which India rather meekly objected, I must say. And the U.S. immediately responded by hitting another Indian ship. So, yeah, no respect for India in this situation, by the way — no apologies, nothing, nothing. No, no. And India has asked the U.S. to respect and to not attack civilians.

## **#Nima**

And of course, the U.S. just ignored India. All right.

## **#Mark**

That's the most popular, the diplomatic power of the most populous, supposedly democratic country in the world. Anyway, India, you're going to have to take a side one of these days, man. Really, you are. You're going to have to take a side. You're going to have to pull that ostrich head out of the sand and take a side. But regardless, what we saw, I believe it was on Thursday, was that during one of these attempted guidance operations, Iran decided to smack back, and they knocked down one of the U.S. Apache helicopters that was supposedly providing this moral support, flying around the Strait of Hormuz to encourage another tanker to try to sneak through.

And Iran hit them. As far as, you know, what the U.S. says and what seems to have been confirmed by some Iranian official statements, yeah, that's what happened. They were lauded as heroes and martyrs and so forth. So they hit an Apache with a Shahed drone, and that was it. And the U.S. felt the need to respond to this, Trump making another blustery, you know, fire-and-fury post. And the U.S. responded with some strikes on Iran that, as far as I can tell, mostly seemed to attempt to target air and missile defense installations. But among the other targets that they hit were water reservoirs.

Right. Which is not, in any conceivable stretch of the imagination, a legitimate military dual-use anything target—water reservoirs. This is a war crime. And the New York Times even admitted this and said, well, if the Trump administration knew about it and knew what they were hitting—of course they fucking did—then it was a war crime. So that is a new level of escalation, of course. And it is a sign of desperation, not strength, as the Iranian Speaker of the Parliament, Ghalibaf, pointed out almost immediately in a post. So depriving 20,000 civilians of, you know, at least running drinking water, you know, potable water.

For what? I don't. If Iran were to adhere to the quid pro quo type of retaliation they have kept to, you would expect them, you could expect them to hit back at a Gulf Arab state, you know, allied with the U.S., from which the U.S. has allied water infrastructure, which would likely mean desalination plants. And that is a major escalatory card that Iran has yet to pull because the Gulf Arab states rely on desalination for the water supply for their populations, from between 60 and 90 percent depending on the country. Meaning that if Iran seriously hit their desalination, that's it. They become unlivable as a country.

They've got to have mass evacuations of population and so forth. And Iran did not rise to that bait on this occasion, interestingly, because they have held to a pretty firm quid pro quo policy when it came to attacks on energy infrastructure before. But they did not go after the Gulf states' water infrastructure as a result. But Iran certainly did reply back, and they pounded U.S. military bases—some 12 locations, I believe—in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Jordan. And in Bahrain, I know they supposedly destroyed one of the last remaining long-range U.S. big radar installations left in the Middle East that they hadn't destroyed during the first round.

And they also hit an airfield, an air base used by the U.S. in Jordan. And there are various reports of either U.S. or Jordanian F-16s being hit, possibly F-35s, F-15Es being hit. We don't know for sure. But the U.S., of course, and Jordan denied that any missiles hit. That has already been proven incorrect by the low-res satellite. But that's just like the U.S. and Israel and the Gulf states denied, denied, denied all previous Iranian hits on these bases. And then a week or two or three later, the satellite info came out, and it was like, yeah, they hit it, and they hit it pretty good.

Oh, and another week later, oh, the damage was a lot more extensive than we admitted and so forth. So that truth will likely slowly dribble out. If Iran managed to damage or destroy a number of F-16s or possibly even F-35s, that's not something the U.S. is going to be able to keep secret in perpetuity, right? I mean, unless you want to say, I don't know. It is entirely possible, of course, that these F-35s would have just had laundry fires. You know, I mean, because that is a hazard. You know, the laundry facilities on F-35s are a problematic thing. That's well admitted.

Anyway, so it seems to me that Iran's tap back against the U.S. was at a higher escalatory level and showed greater capability, certainly against military targets — I'm not talking about water reservoirs — than the U.S. gave to Iran. Once again, signaling to me that Iran has escalatory dominance over the U.S. in this situation, not only asymmetrically with regards to the Strait of Hormuz, but even conventionally in the region. So Trump was going to bomb, he was going to destroy, he was going to seize Harg Island, he was going to take all of Iran's oil. All they needed, of course, to do was to surrender and admit that the U.S. is the greatest power, and then they could have the greatest deal in the world.

And all of these other absolutely unhinged, delusional, megalomaniac, madman comments. I mean, do Americans really understand that their president is talking like a cartoonish Bond villain? I mean, actually, quite seriously, I think most of the Bond villains have better dialogue, more serious dialogue

than Trump does. But he sounds like an unhinged madman. And I believe that probably because he is an unhinged, megalomaniac, extremely insecure little madman. Yeah. But regardless, later on that very evening, we had another serving of tacos delivered by Trump — Thursday tacos this time — and Trump announced that a deal was once again about to be reached.

And he was calling off his scheduled Armageddon on Iran once again for the thirty-ninth — I'd lost count how many times. And then everything since then has been the U.S. and Iran making various claims and denials about the memorandum of understanding that they were supposedly about to sign, or sign off on, or put their digital thumbprint on, whatever, with each other. And that tells me that there are extreme problems, because they both are saying that they're still holding to their own positions, largely. And there's no indication that either one of them has, at least publicly, agreed to the concessions.

As far as I'm concerned, Iran has the escalatory dominance. They are in the dominant position. They have all the cards. They have the leverage. And it should be the U.S. making concessions to them — concessions like withdrawing sanctions, concessions like returning Iran's stolen money that the U.S. has frozen for years. And Iran is even saying that is a precondition, at least some portion of it, to the memorandum of understanding, you know, which, again, is not a deal. It's like a pre-deal. It's like a prenuptial, I guess, something like that. But even that, the U.S. is denying that they're going to return any money.

And they're saying they're going to get all the nuclear dust. And Iran is saying that's not even part of the initial memorandum of understanding. That's a couple of months down the line, and we're not making any commitments on that. Although some of the statements seem to indicate that they actually are willing to dilute their own enriched uranium, essentially because apparently they feel they don't need it anymore. They've discovered their power, their nuclear option of the Strait — control of the Strait of Hormuz — and how that is much more powerful in many ways, and certainly much more usable than a nuclear deterrent.