



INDEPENDENT

Trump has found himself in a mess with Iran. But one Republican senator could save us all

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A new development may have emerged in the stand-off between Washington DC and Tehran this week. Republican Senator Rand Paul is said to have asked Donald Trump's blessing to reach out to Iran on the president's behalf. Senator Paul proposed to have a meeting with Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif, and President Trump signed off on the idea, *Politico* has reported.

The libertarian senator, who has long been a vocal critic of wars in the Middle East and a supporter of diplomacy with Iran, is probably the best chance President Trump has at starting talks with Iran — and avoiding war. Now is the time to do that.

Zarif is back in New York this week, attending events at the United Nations while also meeting American journalists and foreign policy influencers, and doing another round of interviews with US media. The foreign minister seems to be trying to defuse tensions with Trump while saving face for the Islamic Republic back in Tehran. And Senator Paul's olive branch could fit nicely in to that scenario.

A senior Congressional aide in Washington told me earlier that “Senator Paul has been one of the strongest voices in Congress for avoiding new, stupid wars. He's also known to be close to Trump, which makes him a good choice for this.” The staffer added: “The fact that the DC pro-war crowd is freaking out and trying to undermine him is also strong evidence that it's a good idea.”

Trump's own cabinet members have been too hawkish on Iran to be able to open a backchannel. His national security advisor John Bolton has been advocating bombing Iran in public, and his top diplomat Mike Pompeo recently set 12 conditions for the country that essentially amounted to a regime change. None of them are in a position to start a successful dialogue with the Iranian side.

But Senator Paul is a different story. He opposes military strikes on Iran, has cast doubt on the effectiveness of economic sanctions, and is one of the rare Republicans who backed the Iranian nuclear deal. His non-interventionist perspective is exactly what leaders in Tehran want to hear from Washington.

John Glaser, foreign policy director at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, told me earlier that Rand Paul, over his years in the Senate, “has supported legislative efforts to

check the executive's war powers with regard to military action against Iran. He has also sought to withdraw support — both diplomatic and military — for Iran's regional adversaries (namely the Arab Gulf states).”

There are speculations about how this venture got leaked to the press, with some suggesting the hawks leaked it to make sure it fails. John Glaser is sceptical of that. He told me: “I don't think the hawks in the administration would have calculated that deliberately publicizing a Trump-authorized diplomatic backchannel would successfully foil it.” He added: “I'm more inclined to believe (but I have no inside information confirming it) that this was more of an official leak intended by Trump to signal his willingness to talk to Iran. Judging by the recent incident where Trump backed down from bombing Iran after the downing of a US drone, I think the president feels boxed in by his own antagonistic approach. He thought Iran would capitulate in the face of pressure, or at least offer to renegotiate, and that is the end Trump seeks. He's just ignorant of the fact that his tactics make it less likely.”

President Trump seems to be serious about talks with Iran in order to negotiate a new deal; it's clear he wants to take credit for being a better dealmaker than former president Obama. And just like he did with North Korea, Trump seems to be prepared to go against his own circle of hawks and make serious concessions here. He will be well aware that his non-interventionist base is opposed to a new war in the Middle East, and that leaves him with no other solution to the stalemate than diplomacy.

This is a rare opportunity from a Republican president, and Iranian leaders need to take advantage of it. Iran should tweak its demand of returning to the nuclear deal, or the JCPOA, and make an offer that is face-saving for Trump. Lifting economic sanctions, especially on Iranian oil, would be a good start: such a move would be both beneficial to Iran and doable for the president. He wouldn't even need to lift the oil sanctions — he could simply resume issuing waivers for major buyers of Iranian oil, just as he was doing until a couple of months ago.

Iran must also be prepared for an updated deal. The new deal could potentially be very similar to the JCPOA, but the packaging must have Donald Trump's name on it. Otherwise there is little chance of a solution out of the current deadlock. As the ousted UK ambassador Kim Darroch opined in his leaked cables, Trump most likely pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal to “spite” his predecessor, Barack Obama. His motivations for returning will no doubt be similar.