

# *Iran and U.S. Held Secret Talks on Proxy Attacks and Cease-Fire*

Diplomats gathered in Oman in January, with the U.S. side seeking to stop attacks on Red Sea shipping and American bases, and Iran looking for a Gaza cease-fire.

**By Farnaz Fassihi and Eric Schmitt**

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Iran and the United States held secret, indirect talks in Oman in January, addressing the escalating threat posed to Red Sea shipping by the Houthis in Yemen, as well as the attacks on American bases by Iran-backed militias in Iraq, according to Iranian and U.S. officials familiar with the discussions.

The secret talks were held on Jan. 10 in Muscat, the capital of Oman, with Omani officials shuffling messages back and forth between delegations of Iranians and Americans sitting in separate rooms. The delegations were led by Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran's deputy foreign minister and chief nuclear negotiator, and Brett McGurk, President Biden's coordinator for the Middle East.

The meeting, first reported by The Financial Times this week, was the first time Iranian and American officials had held in-person negotiations — albeit indirectly — in nearly eight months. American officials said Iran requested the meeting in January and the Omanis strongly recommended that the United States accept.

Since the beginning of the war in Gaza after Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks on Israel, the United States and Iran have reassured each other that neither was seeking a direct confrontation, a stance conveyed in messages they passed through intermediaries.

But in Oman, each side had a clear request of the other, according to U.S. and Iranian officials.

Washington wanted Iran to rein in its proxies to stop the Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea and the targeting of American bases in Iraq and Syria. Tehran, in turn, wanted the Biden administration to deliver a cease-fire in Gaza.

President Biden at Dover Air Force Base last month, watching as one of the three American soldiers killed in a drone strike by an Iran-backed militia was brought home. Kenny Holston/The New York Times

No agreement was reached, however, and within hours after Mr. McGurk left the meeting with the Iranians, the United States led military strikes on Jan. 11 on multiple Houthi targets in Yemen. In early February, the United States launched strikes on Iranian-linked military bases in Iraq and Syria in retaliation for the killing of three American service members in an attack by Iraqi militia close to Iran.

Attacks on U.S. bases have since ended in Iraq, and there have been reports of only a few such attacks in Syria.

A senior American official said that the United States had engaged in the talks to show that even as tensions spiked, Washington was still open to pursuing diplomacy with Iran — but that if the dialogue did not produce results, the United States would use force.

Two Iranian officials, one with the foreign ministry, said that Iran had maintained in the talks that it did not control the activity of the militia, particularly the Houthis, but that it could use its influence on them to ensure that all attacks would come to a halt if a cease-fire were reached in Gaza — but not before.

Iran and the United States have continued trading messages regularly about the proxy militias and a cease-fire since they met in January, with the Omanis as intermediaries, American and Iranian officials said.

Smoke rose in Sana after strikes last month by U.S. and British forces, carried out in response to Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping. Yahya Arhab/EPA, via Shutterstock

“Having channels of communication, even if indirect, can certainly be useful to mitigating the possibility of miscalculation and misunderstanding,” said Ali Vaez, the Iran director for International Crisis Group. “But, as we’ve seen since then, especially but certainly not exclusively over Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, tensions between the two sides remain significant.”

The United States and Iran both made decisions to avert a direct war in February. American forces avoided direct hits on Iran in their military response, and Iran persuaded the militia in Iraq to stop attacks on U.S. bases and the militias in Syria to decrease the intensity of attacks to prevent American deaths.

But the Houthis have carried on with 102 attacks against ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden since Nov. 19, according to the Pentagon. As of March 14, the United States had conducted 44 strikes on Houthi targets, but these attacks have not deterred the Houthis, who have threatened to use more advanced weaponry.

A senior U.S. official said the Houthis had conducted a test launch of a new medium-range missile. The official said the reports in the Russian news media this week about the Houthis’ gaining access to hypersonic missiles were most likely not accurate.

The Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi said on Thursday that the Houthis would be expanding their targeting range to stop Israeli-linked ships from passing through the Indian Ocean and the Cape of Good Hope, along Africa’s far southern coast.

Analysts said that the Houthis had turned out to be a winning card for Iran in the current conflict because they had inflicted damage to international shipping and increased the stakes of the war in Gaza beyond the region. It is leverage that Iran will not give up easily, analysts said.

A Houthi supporter waved a Palestinian flag as he passed a billboard featuring the Houthis' leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, in Sana on Friday. Yahya Arhab/EPA, via Shutterstock

Last spring, Iran and U.S. delegations in Oman negotiated a deal to release American detainees held in Iran in exchange for the release of about \$6 billion of Iran's frozen oil-revenue funds in South Korea. They also reached an unofficial agreement to defuse tensions in the region and lower the severity of attacks on American bases in Iraq and Syria.

“The goal of the recent negotiations in Oman was for both sides to return to that unofficial agreement and keep tensions at a low level,” said Sasan Karimi, a political analyst in Tehran. “We shouldn't expect any breakthroughs between Iran and the U.S.; it's all narrowly focused on the region for now. They want Iran to use its convincing power with the militia, and Iran is saying, Not so fast, not until you give us a cease-fire.”

Michael D. Shear contributed reporting from Washington.

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