

Malley as Iran Envoy: Hawks and Progressives Spar over Possible Nomination

Reports that Robert Malley, lead Iran negotiator under Obama, is being considered for envoy position sparks outrage from conservatives

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Despite deep divisions plaguing American politics, the Republican pushback against President Joe Biden’s cabinet nominees has been relatively quiet.

Days into the new administration, the Senate confirmed Biden’s secretaries of state, treasury and defence, as well as intelligence chief with bipartisan support as other nominees undergo routine hearings.

A fight may be looming, however, over the potential nomination of Robert Malley, an outspoken proponent of diplomacy, as the administration’s envoy for Iran.

Malley, an Obama-era diplomat, leads the International Crisis Group think tank, which focuses on preventing and resolving violent conflicts. His possible appointment has faced an early backlash from conservatives and earned the praise of advocates of the Iran nuclear deal.

Sina Toossi, a senior research analyst at the National Iranian American Council ([NIAC](#)), said a well-funded and coordinated “network” of anti-Iran hawks that has been smearing advocates of diplomacy with Tehran has “drawn the line” on Malley.

“Rob Malley was the Obama administration’s chief nuclear negotiator – someone has experience negotiating with the Iranians, who is an actual diplomat,” Toossi told MEE.

“These attacks are part of a broader effort against diplomacy with Iran, against reversing Trump’s disastrous approach towards Iran.”

Backlash

The chatter, opposition and praise for Malley started last week when [Jewish Insider](#) reported that he was being considered for the position of special envoy for Iran.

“It’s deeply troubling that President Biden would consider appointing Rob Malley to direct Iran policy,” Republican Senator [Tom Cotton](#) wrote on [Twitter](#) last week.

“Malley has a long track record of sympathy for the Iranian regime & animus towards Israel. The ayatollahs wouldn’t believe their luck if he is selected.”

The post from Cotton, a staunchly conservative foreign policy hawk, prompted many to leap to Malley’s defence.

Palestinian-American analyst Yousef Munayyer said Cotton’s opposition was an additional reason to tap Malley for the job.

“President Biden shouldn’t hesitate to pick someone like Malley, and if he had any doubt, the fact that a sociopath like Tom Bomb Everything Cotton opposes it should make it a slam dunk,” [Munayyer wrote](#) on Twitter.

Some of Malley’s former colleagues have also lauded the former diplomat.

“Rob Malley is an extraordinary diplomat, a brilliant strategist, and a profoundly decent human being,” [said](#) Ben Rhodes, who served as deputy national security adviser under former President Barack Obama.

“While his critics were supporting and enabling authoritarianism these last few years, Rob was fighting it and standing up for human rights around the world.”

Who is Rob Malley?

Malley served in various senior capacities at the Obama White House, including as advisor to the campaign to defeat the Islamic State group, Middle East coordinator at the National Security Council and special assistant to the president.

He was the lead US negotiator in the talks that led to the Iran nuclear deal. The multilateral pact, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), saw Iran scale back its nuclear programme in exchange for lifting sanctions against its economy.

Former President Donald Trump nixed the deal in 2018, but Biden has signalled that he plans to bring back the agreement and use it to launch negotiations over broader issues with Tehran.

Malley started his government service during the administration of former President Bill Clinton, where he served as senior aide on Arab-Israeli affairs and director of Near East and South Asian affairs at the National Security Council.

Malley’s father, who was born in Egypt to a Jewish family of Syrian descent, was a leftist journalist who wrote extensively about the anti-colonial struggle in Africa.

The former diplomat has been critical of Israeli policies against Palestinians.

In a [Foreign Policy column](#) he co-authored in April, Malley urged Biden to warn the Israeli

government against plans to annex parts of the West Bank, including by pledging to allow international criticism of Israeli actions and using US aid as leverage.

“Even as the United States continues to support Israel’s security, a President Biden could explore ways of deducting any money spent on the annexed territories from generous US assistance, consistent with the long-standing US policy of deducting spending on Israeli settlements in the West Bank from US loan guarantees,” the article reads.

“If such a policy were made clear, any decision by Israel’s government to nonetheless go forward with annexation would be a sign that it felt secure enough to forgo a portion of US assistance.”

Later in 2020, Malley appeared sceptical about the normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel, which halted Israel’s formal annexation scheme – at least temporarily.

“Those most strongly [against] deal oppose annexation not [because] it’s new but bc it isn’t – bc it merely formalizes existing reality. See only harm in rewarding Israel for keeping hidden policies annexation [would] have brought to light. They oppose annexation because it is the status quo,” Malley [wrote](#) on Twitter.

The post, part of a series of tweets on the normalisation deal, does not necessarily convey Malley’s own views, but rather what he thinks critics of the agreement are saying. Nonetheless, it demonstrated understanding of Palestinians’ grievances beyond the bipartisan consensus in support of Israel.

Late in 2020, Malley criticised Trump’s efforts to reward Arab states who formalise relations with Israel, including weapons deals to the UAE and recognising Morocco’s claims to Western Sahara.

“All diplomacy is transactional, but these transactions are mixing things that ought not to have been mixed,” Malley told the New York Times.

Last week, the Zionist Organization of America, a right-wing pro-Israel group, slammed Malley’s rumoured appointment, calling his views “extremely dangerous for the United States and our allies”.

Iran deal

If Malley gets nominated to the post of special envoy for Iran, he would be able to play an instrumental role in reviving diplomacy with the Islamic Republic.

The US and Iran do not have formal diplomatic ties. Malley would be based in Washington, not Tehran. The envoy would be the public face and spearhead of America’s policy towards Iran.

For example, former Iran envoy Brian Hook toured the world to promote Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign, of which he was one of the leading architects.

When Hook quit last year, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called him “my point person on Iran” and credited him for “historic results countering the Iranian regime”.

Malley’s mission would be to unroll a lot of what Hook did.

Biden is already facing calls to delay [the return](#) to the JCPOA in order to secure a more comprehensive agreement that would address Tehran’s regional activities and ballistic missile programme.

So far, the president and his top aides have maintained that Washington will abide by the deal if Tehran also returns to full compliance. Iran had loosened its commitments to the deal, increasing uranium enrichment levels in response to US sanctions.

Secretary of State Tony Blinken told lawmakers last week that the administration would return to the JCPOA and use it as a “platform – with our allies and partners, who would once again be on the same side with us – to seek a longer and stronger agreement”.

Appointing Malley, Toossi said, would signal that Biden is serious about reviving the Iran deal.

“The personnel are reflective of what the policy is going to be... Choosing people like Rob Malley, this shows that the policy that Biden wants to pursue towards Iran is going to be a diplomatically-driven policy. It is going to be seriously aimed at getting a deal, not just rhetoric,” Toossi said.

Malley, who has personally met with top Iranian officials, would also help establish a communication channel with the Iranians to address broader issues or incidents that may arise in the region, Toossi added.

Still, conservatives argue that Malley’s possible appointment would be a gift to the Iranian government and a disservice to the Iranian people who oppose the regime in Tehran.

“Malley is widely seen as one of Tehran’s premier apologists in Washington; in November 2019 he went so far as to suggest that massive public protests in Iran justified Tehran’s paranoia about an Israeli-Saudi-US plot,” New York Times columnist Bret Stephens wrote on Tuesday.

“A Malley appointment would signal that, on the things that matter most, Biden’s foreign policy will be coldly transactional.”

Critics of Stephens, a conservative columnist with frequent [controversial](#) takes, were quick to [point out](#) that Malley was describing the way the Iranian government views events in the region, not justifying the crackdown on protests.

Malley’s possible appointment will be a telling indicator of how Biden will deal with Tehran. Foreign policy progressives are already rallying around Malley and backing him for the job.

“Rob Malley is an extremely knowledgeable expert with great experience in promoting US security through diplomacy rather than war,” Senator Bernie Sanders wrote on [Twitter](#) last Friday. “He would be an excellent choice for the role of Iran envoy.”

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