

Another Iran “Deal” Is Less Important Than Exerting U.S. Leverage

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Brief Analysis

U.S. envoys should be focused less on making a deal and more on how they can use the prospect of imminent military strikes to secure concessions on the nuclear issue, missile threats, treatment of protesters, and other matters.

Nearly eight months after the twelve-day war, which saw the United States and Israel team up to strike Iran’s nuclear and missile programs, Washington is once again on the brink of war with Tehran. In a sign of the Iranian regime’s worry about military action, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has reportedly agreed to meet American envoy Steve Witkoff on February 6, possibly with the foreign ministers of other regional states. Although questions have arisen as to whether and where the meeting will occur, the parties are clearly at an inflection point in which Iran is offering talks again and the U.S. administration is willing to entertain them.

The proximate cause of the current tensions is last month’s regime crackdown on widespread protests, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Iranians. During that turmoil, President Trump took the extraordinary step of promising intervention on behalf of demonstrators. As protests ramped up, he [urged them](#) (<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115888317758045915>) to “KEEP PROTESTING—TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS” and promised “HELP IS ON ITS WAY.” Although he dispatched military forces to the region, including the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group, Trump ultimately chose not to intervene during the protests themselves, asserting that his threats had led the regime to cancel planned executions of hundreds of demonstrators.

Far from fading away, however, U.S. concerns about the regime's crackdown only compounded other security concerns. Joint strikes by the United States and Israel in 2025 significantly set back Iran's nuclear program but did not eliminate it. Instead, the program's status has been left more uncertain than at any point in the last several decades due to the long absence of international inspectors or reliable reporting on the disposition of nuclear materials and activities. Likewise, Iran's missile launchers and arsenal were damaged but far from obliterated, and the surprising effectiveness of those missiles led Israeli authorities to deem them not just a risk but an existential threat. Tehran has also taken steps to reconstitute its network of partners and proxies, such as resuming funding for Lebanese Hezbollah at pre-October 2023 levels.

Even before January's protests, there was widespread expectation in the Middle East that the coming months would bring another round of Israeli strikes against Iran, likely focused on further degrading its missile capabilities. It is now expected that any strikes would be conducted jointly by the United States and Israel and would have wider but as yet unclear objectives, perhaps including regime change. Yet just like in June 2025, President Trump has also offered a diplomatic off-ramp, suggesting (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c394ymdpjwvo>) that Tehran can forestall strikes by adhering to two warnings: "no nuclear" and "stop killing protesters."

Two U.S. Options, Multiple Challenges

U. S.-Iran diplomacy is always fraught with difficulty. The four issues likely at the center of upcoming talks—the nuclear program, missile program, support for regional proxies and terrorist groups, and human rights—have been on the agenda for decades with varying degrees of focus. In 2015, when negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Obama administration was criticized for focusing narrowly on the nuclear issue and omitting virtually all others. U.S. officials at the time defended the decision as both pragmatic and strategic—they were trying to address the most serious issue and create space for future agreements on other matters of concern.

There is little chance Washington will make a similar calculation this time. Besides the fact that President Trump was a vocal critic of the JCPOA and withdrew from it in 2018, any current bid to make a nuclear-only deal with Iran would not be viewed as principled or even pragmatic. On the contrary, offering Iran reprieve from strikes or other concessions in exchange for nuclear steps alone would be seen as abandoning Trump's commitment to Iranian protesters, on par with Obama's infamous decision not to enforce his "red line" against the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in 2013. A nuclear-only deal may not even meet the minimal objective of heading off regional conflict—Israel remains intent on degrading Iran's missile program, which would almost surely require it to conduct airstrikes in the coming months in the absence of a negotiated solution.

These factors seemingly leave the administration with two options: military strikes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-military-options-iran-means-search-end>), or a "grand bargain" encompassing all of Washington's concerns. Neither, however, appears satisfactory. The administration can have little confidence that air and missile strikes alone would achieve U.S. goals with respect to the nuclear program. The bulk of Iran's high-enriched uranium, for example, is likely either buried under rubble at the sites struck last June or safely tucked away in hardened tunnels. As such, it would need to be handled manually, requiring troops on the ground, inspectors, or another party to enter those sites. Nor can the administration have any confidence that new strikes—even targeted operations against Iran's leadership—would produce regime change or a new government more amenable to American interests.

A grand bargain may be a taller order still. Asking the regime to give up its suppression of dissent, missile capabilities, regional proxy networks, and nuclear program would be tantamount to demanding a wholesale shift in the Islamic Republic's national security strategy. Although the regime is significantly weakened, it does not appear ready for such a shift. Iranian commentators tend to describe the results of last year's war as a stalemate, ascribing President Trump's decision to unilaterally declare a ceasefire after a single day of U.S. strikes to Iranian deterrence.

Regime officials may believe that the threat of missiles and asymmetric power is sufficient to deter the United States and Israel from additional military campaigns, and they can only be encouraged by the fact that regional states [rushed to dissuade \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-united-states-doesnt-strike-iran\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-if-united-states-doesnt-strike-iran) the Trump administration from fresh strikes.

Such obstacles have led [some to suggest \(https://www.wsj.com/opinion/donald-trump-iran-talks-steve-witkoff-regime-change-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-f362676e?mod=opinion_lead_pos1\)](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/donald-trump-iran-talks-steve-witkoff-regime-change-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-f362676e?mod=opinion_lead_pos1) that only a policy of regime change can satisfy American interests. But without a viable plan to achieve it, regime change is an aspiration rather than a policy. The different methods to attempt it are either unrealistic in the context of current U.S. politics (e.g., full-scale invasion) or seem likely to take a great deal of time (e.g., non-military pressure on the regime and support for the Iranian people). And if the United States proceeds with the avowed aim of regime change, the effects might be the opposite of U.S. intentions—the regime might escalate its crackdown on protesters, build up its missiles and proxies, and perhaps even go for a nuclear weapon to stave off its demise.

A Way Through

Despite these difficulties, the Trump administration possesses considerable advantages in any face-off with Iran: the regime is almost certainly not enriching uranium at present and may be deterred from attempting a nuclear breakout using its existing stocks due to fears of U.S. or Israeli attack; as the June war showed, Iran is highly vulnerable to attack, and both the United States and Israel have shed their reluctance to strike the country directly, making military threats highly credible; Tehran's regional proxies are currently incapable of coming decisively to its defense, and partners such as Russia and China have shown no willingness to do so; and Iran faces unprecedented economic and political challenges at home.

With these advantages in mind, the Trump administration should be thinking less about a “deal” with Tehran and more about how it can use the threat of imminent strikes to press its demands of Iran on a range of concerns, including:

- **The nuclear program.** The administration should insist that Tehran meet its international obligations by fully cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency, allowing IAEA personnel to resume full inspection, monitoring, and verification activities on Iranian soil. In addition, Washington should insist that Iran submit to the IAEA a full accounting of its residual nuclear materials and activities, as well as the location of any debris from the nuclear sites attacked in June. On the basis of this accounting, the United States can work with the IAEA to arrange for the retrieval and export of Iran's enriched uranium stockpile. U.S. officials should also reaffirm that any Iranian attempt to reconstitute the program, break for a bomb, or mislead the IAEA would be justification to launch further strikes.
- **Human rights.** Even if the Trump administration wrings significant nuclear concessions from Iran, talks between Witkoff and Araghchi are likely to be viewed as a failure if the United States does not secure concessions regarding the regime's treatment of its own people. After all, Trump's pledge to help the protesters is what precipitated the current showdown, and the extent to which he meets that promise will be what distinguishes this episode from Obama's “red line” debacle. Specifically, the administration should demand that the regime take significant measures to ease pressure on the Iranian people by (1) reversing communication blockages and other steps taken against them during the recent protests, (2) releasing all political prisoners, and (3) verifiably refraining from political executions, mistreatment, and persecution.
- **Missiles and proxies.** The Trump administration should ask regional partners such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Egypt to negotiate with Tehran on mutually agreed limits regarding two key threats in the Middle East: the size, range, and composition of missile arsenals, and support for nonstate actors. At

the same time, Washington should make clear that although it is concerned about Tehran’s missile program and will seek Iranian steps to reduce this threat, it will not impose its solutions on Israel—that is, Israel will retain freedom of action even if the United States chooses not to strike. If Iran and other regional states wish for Israel to desist from strikes, they must directly address Israel’s concerns rather than ask Washington to intervene. The Trump administration should also remind regional partners that failure to normalize relations with Israel diminishes their ability to influence Jerusalem’s thinking and broker regional peace.

What the Trump administration should not do in any talks held this week or down the road is offer sanctions relief in exchange for Iranian concessions in the model of the JCPOA. The United States should make clear that the burden is on the Iranian regime to stave off conflict. As the regime teeters after massacring its own people, the United States has no obligation to rescue it from its own choices.

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