

Trump's Best Options on Iran: Limited Strikes and Continued Military, Economic, and Diplomatic Pressure

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Brief Analysis

Rather than choose between a narrow nuclear deal and open-ended war, the United States should conduct limited military strikes against Iran's missile program and security services and double down on a pressure strategy that was working.

Following U.S. and Israeli strikes in June 2025, the Trump administration appeared to demote Iran significantly in its foreign policy priorities. President Trump frequently asserted that the strikes had “obliterated” Iran’s nuclear program, and analysts close to the administration argued that the campaign had set Iran’s efforts to produce a nuclear weapon back by years.

These conclusions were debatable. While the sites the United States and Israel targeted were significantly damaged and key nuclear personnel eliminated, Iran still possesses large amounts of high-enriched uranium (HEU) and likely has the wherewithal to turn it into at least a crude nuclear weapon in only a few months. Much of the assessment of Iran’s residual nuclear capabilities rested on unknowns, such as how much of its HEU was accessible, the expertise of surviving nuclear scientists, and how quickly Tehran could reconstitute a weaponization capability.

Nevertheless, few close observers have argued that Iran’s nuclear program still poses an urgent threat after the strikes, even if it remains a serious one. This makes it all the more surprising that in the current negotiations, which began with Trump’s threat to intervene on behalf of Iranian protesters, the focus is once again almost exclusively on the nuclear issue.

Issues on the Table

Amid the U.S. military buildup after the January massacres in Iran, the Trump administration articulated four issues it wished to address: nuclear weapons, missile capabilities, treatment of protesters, and the regime’s support for proxy forces such as Hezbollah. The conundrum posed by this agenda, however, is that no single strategy

is likely to address all four concerns. Addressing Iran's residual nuclear capabilities would likely require removing its HEU from facilities and tunnels buried under rubble from June's bombing, and bombing them again would avail little. Likewise, verifying that other nuclear activities have ceased would require readmitting inspectors to Iran, which is achievable only through diplomacy.

Yet Iran is unlikely to make negotiated concessions on other U.S. concerns. For at least the last twenty years, the regime has shown no inclination to negotiate seriously about any issue other than the nuclear program. It likely views significant concessions on missiles, proxies, and domestic matters as fatally compromising its entire approach to security and tantamount to surrender in the face of U.S. coercion and domestic unrest. Given such stakes, the regime may believe that war would be less damaging to its prospects for survival.

As a result, Washington's nonnuclear concerns likely require it to resort to tools other than direct diplomacy. Iran's missile capabilities can be set back in the short term through military strikes; in the long term, Iran may agree to a regional framework limiting missile arsenals and proliferation but is likely to seek to retain the ability to strike Israel even at significant cost. Blunting Iran's support for proxies requires an even broader set of tools, including efforts to weaken those proxies directly and punitive actions against Iran to disincentivize support for them. Perhaps most important, these tools include support for friendly governments in states where these proxies prosper—like Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq—to fill the governance and security vacuums in which Iran's partners thrive.

The Way Forward

In the current crisis, President Trump appears to be weighing two options: a nuclear deal negotiated directly with Iran, or military strikes whose possible scope and objectives remain uncertain. On the first option, there is little to suggest that Iran would entertain a deal that fully or even significantly addresses U.S. concerns. Iranian negotiators have reportedly prepared a proposal that insists on Tehran's "right" to enrich, asking Washington to accept a limited Iranian enrichment capability that they claim would be strictly for medical research. Tehran has reportedly packaged this request with concessions such as not accumulating enriched uranium and readmitting international nuclear inspectors.

Such a deal would represent a major climbdown for the United States, however. Not only does it fail to address the root cause of the current crisis—Iran's treatment of protesters—it also asks Washington to stand by as Tehran rebuilds enrichment activities eliminated in June. Nor are Iran's reported concessions as valuable as they may at first glance seem: allowing even a token level of enrichment likely implies permitting Iran to possess the entire nuclear supply chain, from uranium mining and conversion to centrifuge production, in addition to gaining experience in the enrichment process itself. Even if international monitors verify that Iran is not accumulating enriched uranium through export or downblending, this could easily be reversed.

A lengthy and ambitious war, however, is not desirable, nor is it the only alternative to whatever deal Iranian negotiators offer. Such a war would have many downsides: drawing U.S. resources from the administration's priority theaters in the Indo-Pacific and Western Hemisphere, further drawing down already-depleted munitions stockpiles, and risking damage and loss of life to U.S. forces and other American and allied targets.

Some have touted such a war as a means of toppling Iran's regime. However, it is uncertain whether war would achieve this outcome short of a much more significant military effort, for which the United States does not have the necessary forces in the region. It is also unclear if such a war would be positive for the region or for the Iranians whom President Trump set out to help. Past regime change operations have a poor record even when the United States was prepared to provide stabilization forces and significant economic investment, neither of which appears to be in the offing now. This should give policymakers pause. The administration may be emboldened by its apparent success in Venezuela, but it is unclear whether the removal of President Nicolas Maduro represents regime change,

and it will be some time before the policy can be judged a success or failure.

Instead of launching a regime change war, the administration should remember that the January protests that precipitated the current crisis were at least partly the result of a successful U.S. policy of multifaceted pressure. President Trump's best way forward is not to alter that strategy but to double down on it by doing the following:

- **Launch limited military strikes.** The United States, together with Israel if practical (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-iran-us-israeli-division-labor>), should engage in limited strikes against Iran's missile arsenal and security service targets. This would address the near-term threat of Iran's missiles (which will likely prompt Israeli strikes this year anyway) and allow President Trump to say he followed through on his warnings regarding the regime's treatment of protesters. Tehran may retaliate for such strikes, but Washington and Jerusalem have demonstrated in the past their capacity to limit the effectiveness of Iranian retaliation. Washington should also make clear that it is willing to strike again in the future, and that it will support additional Israeli strikes as needed.
- **Redouble economic pressure.** The January protests were sparked by a dramatic decline in the value of Iran's currency. The Trump administration should seek to increase economic pressure on the regime by placing the issue high on the agenda for President Trump's summit with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in April. While China's oil imports from Iran have apparently declined in recent months, a further, longer-lasting reduction would leave Iran with few alternative export destinations. Beijing could contribute even more to this pressure if it refrains from helping Tehran rebuild its missile and nuclear programs. Meanwhile, the Trump administration can make clear what economic benefits would be available for a post-Islamic Republic Iran.
- **Support the Iranian people.** The ultimate U.S. objective in Iran, shared by multiple administrations, is positive change that originates from within the country. Yet too frequently, Washington gives serious consideration to supporting the Iranian people only when protests break out. The Trump administration should instead formulate a strategy for long-term support of Iranian dissidents. This could include providing technology (e.g., VPN access, Starlink terminals, direct-to-cell access on Starlink), funding human rights documentation and related activities, conveying information on social media, and resuming U.S. government broadcasting. It could also include other forms of support, such as increased visa access for Iranian activists and, if necessary, sanctions modifications to allow those outside Iran to provide financial assistance to activists inside the country.
- **Increase engagement in the Middle East.** Washington should begin to address Iran's support for proxies with more robust engagement in the areas where they thrive. The administration has devoted significant time and attention to Gaza, yet Hamas has arguably been strengthened politically, if not militarily, by the events of the past two-plus years. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is weakened militarily but still has no rivals for political power within the Shia Muslim community; in Yemen, the Houthis' political power is at the root of their ability to project force. In each place, the United States should be looking to transform military victories into longer-lasting political—and thus strategic—gains.

While these steps do not address Iran's residual nuclear program, neither do they foreclose future bilateral or international negotiations on those capabilities. In addition, Iran so far appears to have been deterred from significantly rebuilding or advancing its nuclear capabilities, and it will likely remain so as long as the United States appears willing to employ force as needed.

Iran faces a strategic conundrum: its longstanding strategy of threatening adversaries with its missile arsenal, proxy network, and latent nuclear capabilities has failed, and the regime appears to lack ideas for a new strategy or the flexibility to pursue one. In contrast, U.S. strategy toward Iran appears to have produced unprecedented pressure on the regime. The Trump administration's best bet, and its best way to support the Iranian people in their aspirations for a better future, is to patiently continue a strategy of military, economic, and diplomatic pressure.

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