How to Accomplish U.S. Objectives in Iran

by Michael Singh **(/experts/michael-singh)**

May 14, 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Singh (/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Managing Director and Steven D. Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Brief Analysis

An agreement to open the Strait of Hormuz in exchange for lifting the U.S. blockade could make it easier to ultimately address more complex issues such as Iran's uranium stockpile, missile program, and support for proxies.

On April 7, President Trump declared that the United States had largely accomplished its military objectives in Iran. Washington might then have ended offensive operations and withdrawn the forces it had surged to the region if not for one thing: Iran's control over the Strait of Hormuz. Six weeks later, that obstacle to American disengagement remains, so reopening the strait and restoring the status quo ante should be the sole focus of U.S. diplomatic and military efforts. Other issues can be addressed using different policy tools over time—a point of leverage for America while Iran's new leaders struggle.

From Many Obstacles to One

When the United States and Israel launched their joint military offensive on February 28, their objectives were not immediately clear. Yet the ensuing operations significantly degraded Iran's military, taking out a sizable percentage of its missile/drone capabilities and defense industrial base while largely destroying its navy and air force. The country's political and military leaders were decimated as well, with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other top officials assassinated in the early days of fighting. Other efforts—such as strikes on the already-hobbled nuclear program and an apparent Israeli-led effort to destabilize the regime—had more ambiguous results.

Nevertheless, when taken together with other U.S. and partner efforts since the beginning of 2025, these wartime outcomes constitute major strides in nearly all areas of U.S. concern with Iran. Last June, the nuclear program was set back by months, perhaps years, as a result of allied strikes, which apparently left Tehran without a viable uranium enrichment program. In September, both the international prohibition on Iranian enrichment and UN sanctions on the regime were restored through the snapback mechanism of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Moreover, Hezbollah, Hamas, and other top Iranian terrorist partners have been severely degraded

through Israeli military action, while Operation Epic Fury has dealt Iran additional blows.

What now bedevils the United States, however, are none of these longstanding concerns but rather a new one that the conflict produced: Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz. This is a familiar dynamic—for example, America's long engagement in Iraq stemmed not from any difficulties in overthrowing Saddam Hussein, but from quelling the insurgency that followed the state's collapse. Today, Iran has established de facto control over traffic through the strait with minimal direct application of force, which has been sufficient to deter most shippers and even navies from attempting to transit the waterway. While Iran has achieved this deterrence at a relatively low cost, the United States has discovered that it is much harder—and would be far costlier—to provide shippers with the reassurance necessary to counter Iran's latent ability to exert control.

The Trouble with Broad Negotiations

Rather than trying to reopen the strait through military force—for example, by employing naval escorts, occupying Iranian territory along the strait, or continuing strikes against missile and drone forces—the Trump administration turned to negotiations. Yet both parties have also used these talks to address other issues on which they are far apart, complicating the negotiations. The issues in question include the U.S. naval blockade of Iranian ports; the regime's nuclear, missile, and drone programs; Iranian support for terrorist proxies; U.S. sanctions on Iran; potential provision of U.S. security assurances to Iran; and even the presence of American forces in the broader Middle East.

From Tehran's perspective, this approach likely makes sense. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has global effects, roiling energy markets, increasing prices, denting economic growth, and creating potential shortages of key goods such as petrochemicals. Iranian leaders therefore see maintaining control of the strait as powerful negotiating leverage.

Yet trying to address a wide range of issues makes far less sense for the United States at the moment, for three reasons:

1. **While blockading Iranian ports gives the United States economic leverage, this is not new—Washington has long employed economic pressure against Iran in the form of sanctions. Ultimately, the blockade may be more damaging to Iran's economy than those sanctions, but it is unlikely in itself to have a dramatically different impact on the regime's decisionmaking.**
2. **The leverage Iran is wielding via the strait has created escalating economic and time pressure on the United States and the rest of the world, likely emboldening the regime and making broad concessions more difficult to obtain. The Trump administration would probably be in a stronger position to negotiate other issues if the strait were open; even if that means ending the U.S. blockade, other forms of pressure will remain in place (e.g., sanctions) or be readily available (e.g., renewed military force).**
3. **The administration appears to be aiming for a JCPOA-like deal, even though circumstances today differ dramatically from those in 2015. At the time, the JCPOA was seen as a difficult but necessary measure to avoid war. Today, those wars have been fought, effectively destroying the nuclear enrichment capabilities that previous administrations sought to limit through diplomacy. By proposing an enrichment "moratorium," the administration is essentially giving Iran permission to eventually resume nuclear activities in which it is not currently engaged, and which the United States employed force less than a year ago to halt. A similar case could be made for Iran's missile and proxy activities.**

Moreover, Iran receives little direct benefit from keeping the Strait of Hormuz closed apart from increased oil prices, which may be a fleeting gain in several scenarios—if the United States tightens the blockade, the regime is forced to curtail production, or prices decline as the conflict eases. Iran could actually benefit more from opening the strait

given the concessions it would receive in exchange for doing so (see below). Hence, despite the leverage it has gained during the war, the regime cannot benefit in the longer term unless it reopens the strait. This fact dramatically improves the prospects for successful diplomacy, but only if the current round of talks is narrowly focused on this issue.

The Way Forward

Strategy is fundamentally about matching ends and means. The risk for the Trump administration is that its ambitions in negotiating with Iran far outstrip the means it is willing to employ. To move past this dilemma, U.S. officials should keep a tight focus on the main problem at hand: the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. This means aiming for a minimalist deal in which Tehran reopens the strait in exchange for Washington lifting the U.S. blockade. To be sure, clarifying the details of this deal will be important—for example, Iran should be required to clear any mines from the strait and barred from charging "tolls" or forcing ships to navigate a course close to its coast. Yet the basic bargain is straightforward.

Although Iran apparently offered a similar trade earlier this month, accomplishing it today may require increased pressure—namely, by demonstrating a willingness to resume the war. For example, if Tehran continues to refuse Washington's terms, the United States should conduct a limited set of strikes on military targets while indicating its willingness to continue—and even escalate—until the strait is open. The measured, patient application of force would likely be more credible and effective than the administration's bombastic but unfulfilled rhetorical threats to conduct more devastating strikes.

This approach would leave a number of important issues unresolved, but the United States has many other tools at its disposal to address them:

- The residual elements of Iran's nuclear program are concerning, especially its stockpile of enriched uranium. A special forces raid to extract the uranium is likely unrealistic—such an operation would almost surely encounter resistance and would be technically complex due to the excavation required and the risks inherent in handling uranium gas. Instead, as President Trump has suggested, the United States should take two steps: (1) if intelligence supports such a move, conduct additional airstrikes to entomb the enriched uranium; (2) monitor the sites where the uranium is stored with the intention of conducting additional strikes if Iran seeks to extract it.
- Alongside a ceasefire negotiated with Iran, the United States should seek a UN Security Council resolution that accomplishes two things: (1) underscores the right of freedom of navigation through international waterways and repudiates Iran's claim to sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz; (2) calls on Iran to honor its nuclear obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty, first and foremost by accepting the return of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. A resolution could also call on Iran to account for its remaining nuclear materials and activities. While both China and Russia might balk at such a resolution, Beijing might accept it as the price for American willingness to lift the blockade, which would isolate Moscow. If Moscow or Beijing vetoes a UN Security Council resolution, however, the United States can still point to multiple Security Council resolutions in force that impose stringent nuclear cooperation and inspection requirements on Iran following the snapback triggered last September. Washington can announce its intention to enforce these resolutions through military action if necessary.
- In addition, the United States should convene a regional security conference with the Gulf states, Turkey, and ideally Israel as well. All these states have been attacked by Iran during the war, and will likely be looking to strengthen their security ties with Washington as well as with other key partners such as Ukraine, which should be included in the proceedings. Such a gathering could not only further integrate security partnerships in the region, but could later serve as a forum in which to engage with Tehran on concerns such as missile and drone activities, support for nonstate actors, and maritime security.

- **Finally, the United States will need an active Iran and Middle East policy, featuring efforts to undermine Iranian proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere and strengthen legitimate governments in those locales, as well as to counter Iranian regime policies and support the Iranian people.**

President Trump may worry that a minimalist deal with Iran would be pilloried as a failure, but such a deal should not be viewed in isolation. Rather, it would reflect a transition in the primary U.S. means to address its full array of concerns with Iran. When taken together with other American and Israeli efforts of the past two years, President Trump could credibly claim to have hobbled Iran's nuclear program, severely degraded its missile, drone, and proxy forces, restored UN sanctions and the international prohibition against Tehran's uranium enrichment, and decimated the Iranian leadership—while reopening the Strait of Hormuz. The Gulf will likely remain unstable for some time and regime change in Iran remains elusive, but this list of accomplishments is nevertheless formidable and will likely leave the Iranian regime struggling with multiple crises for years to come.

Michael Singh is the managing director and Steven D. Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Fatah Meets in Ramallah

May 14, 2026

◆

Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/fatah-meets-ramallah)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

For Iranians to Rise Up, a Clear Path for Regime Defectors Is Needed

May 13, 2026

◆

Holly Dagres

(/policy-analysis/iranians-rise-clear-path-regime-defectors-needed)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Trump’s China Trip: Implications for the Middle East and Beyond

May 13, 2026

◆

Grant Rumley,
Henry Tugendhat,
Elizabeth Dent,
Anna Borshchevskaya,
Souhire Medini

(/policy-analysis/trumps-china-trip-implications-middle-east-and-beyond)

TOPICS

Iran's Foreign Policy (/policy-analysis/irans-foreign-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)