



## Analysis

# The Poisoned Chalice: President Trump's Opportunity with Iran

Gen Frank McKenzie

*Hertog Distinguished Fellow*

*Former Commander, U.S. Central Command*

Five years ago, on January 2, 2020, at the direction of President Donald Trump, forces under my command struck and killed Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani. We undertook this attack in Baghdad, Iraq, where Soleimani travelled to further [coordinate](#) attacks on U.S. persons and interests in Iraq and across the entire Middle East. This was the single most important event to occur in the region in the last 20 years, before the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Then-Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif affirmed the importance of this strike in a leaked oral history. In a story [published](#) in the *New York Times* in 2021, Zarif said, “by assassinating him (Soleimani) in Iraq, the United States delivered a major blow to Iran, more damaging than if it had wiped out an entire city in an attack.”

Most Americans have already forgotten this attack—it’s our nature to focus on the immediate. The Iranians have not forgotten. Because of this, the Iranians know and understand that in his first presidency, Donald Trump was not afraid to employ military power. It’s been concerning enough for Iran to [talk loudly](#) about killing him. The fact that he has returned to the presidency is therefore very concerning to Iranian strategists.

By building on the forceful policy of his first term President Trump can create a window of opportunity to resolve the Iran problem that has proved so vexing for many decades. He has already used military power to bring to heel Iran’s Houthi proxy. By signaling the same willingness to, if necessary, destroy its nuclear program, President Trump can now force Iran to drink from the poisoned chalice—that is, to choose regime survival over continued regional aggression.

## Iran’s Poisoned Chalice

Over many years, the guiding principle of Iranian statecraft has been regime preservation. This has been a constant, even as other objectives such as the destruction of the state of Israel and the ejection of the United States from the region have been aggressively pursued. The fact of the matter is this: Iran will respond and change its behavior if the regime itself is directly threatened.

In 1988, when the Iran-Iraq war appeared trending unfavorably for Iran, then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini chose to make a pragmatic decision to adopt a ceasefire. It has been known since as “to drink from the poisoned chalice.” Khomeini himself [said](#): “Taking this decision is more deadly than drinking from a poisoned chalice. I submitted myself to Allah’s will and took this drink for his satisfaction.” In this case, he clearly placed regime survival above all other considerations. There is an important lesson here: Iran is capable of rational decisions, when it comes to the survival of the regime.

Today, the survival of the regime is less certain than at any time since 1988. Iran is significantly weakened. Its air defense structure has been [reduced](#) by precise Israeli strikes. Its ballistic missile, drone, and land attack cruise missile force—the crown jewel of its strategic deterrence—has been exposed as hollow, as shown by its two unsuccessful major attacks against Israel and its unwillingness to respond to Israel’s last [attack](#). Its principal ally, Lebanese Hezbollah, has been decapitated and is a [shadow](#) of its former self. Bashar Assad has fled Syria, removing one of Iran’s [key clients](#). The loss of Syria, happening at the end of 2024, punctuated a disastrous year for Iranian foreign policy.

## Credibility – Lost and Found

Trump 1.0 was responsible for three significant actions that shape the region today. The first was the strike on Soleimani. This clearly showed an administration that was not in thrall of the potential for escalation. The second was the [signing](#) of the Abraham Accords, which opened the pathway for eventual Israeli diplomatic and economic integration into the region. Finally, the Trump decision to move Israel from United States European Command (EUCOM) into United States Central Command (CENTCOM) [operationalized](#) the Abraham Accords and created the mechanism that [enabled](#) the United States to assist in the defense of Israel from Iranian attack, and to even incorporate the activities of Israel’s neighbors. Taken together, these decisions crafted a coherent way ahead—one that re-established deterrence against Iran at a moment of high crisis, and created an open, flexible architecture for military, diplomatic, and economic integration among all of the states in the region.

This basic construct survived into the Biden administration and was employed by it in some cases. The only missing element was U.S. credibility. President Joe Biden [embraced](#) a softer, less combative, and more accommodating approach. It didn’t work. Under the Biden administration, Iran dramatically [expanded](#) operations in Yemen through its Houthi proxies, continued to expand its [attacks](#) against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, with an intent to force their withdrawal, worked assiduously to [surround](#) Israel, and expanded their ability to [elude](#) oil and other economic sanctions. They also flirted with a level of uranium enrichment that could allow them to develop a nuclear weapon [very quickly](#), perhaps in a matter of days.

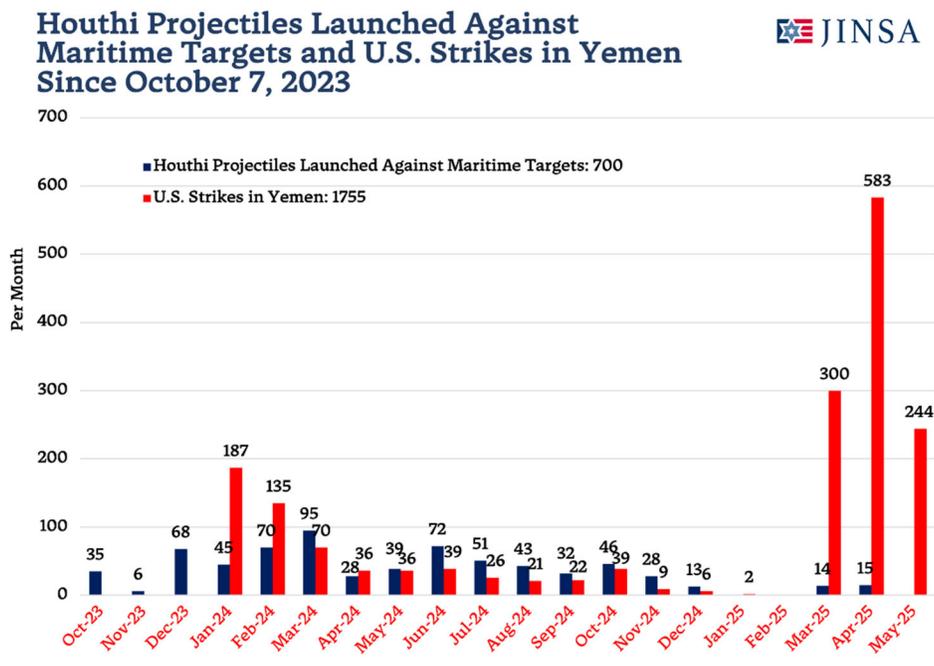
Certainly, the precipitous decision to withdraw from Afghanistan contributed to a narrative of U.S. passivity and ineptitude in the region, which further assisted the Iranian strategy. Moreover, the U.S. drawdown in naval forces in the region to levels not seen in four decades also contributed to Iran’s

perception of U.S. disinterest and withdrawal. Additionally, the Biden administration’s reaction to the monumental events of October 7, 2023 was one of caution and a desire to [prioritize](#) de-escalation and return to the status quo. Because of this fixation, it was more concerned with tactical consequence management than exploiting the strategic opportunities *vis-à-vis* Iran that the conflict presented.

In short, the Biden team lacked the willingness and credibility to use force, which was fundamental to the successes of Trump 1.0. Unfortunately, in the Middle East, establishing credibility about the willingness to employ violence is the beginning of all security dialogues. For the past four years, and until January 2025, our primary emphasis in the Middle East has been on avoiding escalation, and even forceful messages have always been [presaged](#) with a nod to this concept. As morally self-satisfying as such an approach is, in the Middle East it is ultimately self-defeating. In Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, the Dauphin warns the King of France that “self-love, my liege, is not so vile a sin as self-neglect.” Now, this muddled approach is behind us, leaving us with new and compelling opportunities in the region.

### The Houthis

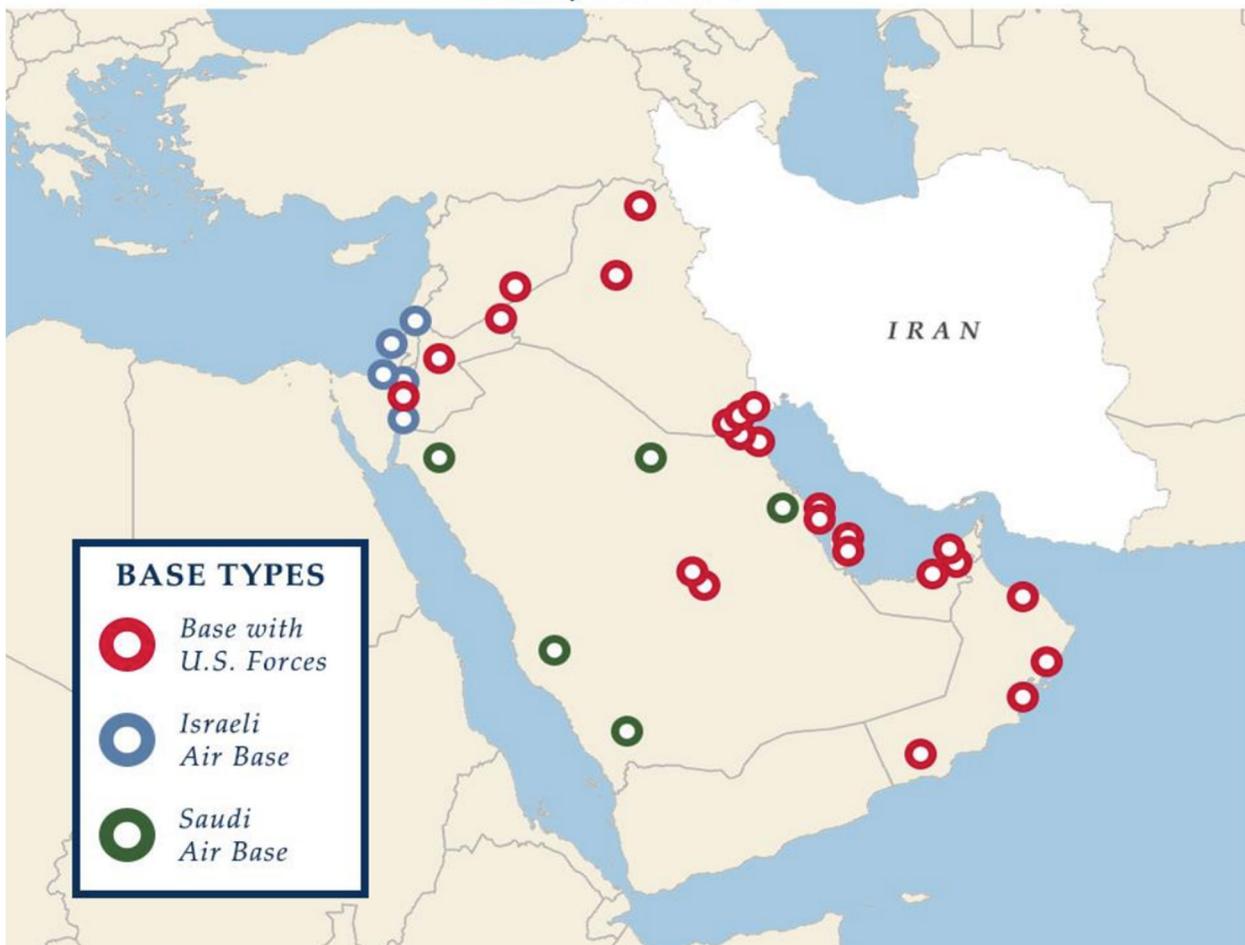
A hint of a potential Trump approach can be seen in the recent decision to strike Houthi targets in Yemen at a [scale](#) never contemplated by the Biden administration. The last administration was supremely concerned about the possibility of Iranian escalation, and this led it to direct strikes on the Houthis which were so weak that they were [ephemeral](#). It also reflected a desire to micromanage military action, with the view that if all things could be known in the Situation Room, then perfect decisions would follow. War, of course, isn’t susceptible to antiseptic management of this nature. As a result, the Iranians achieved and maintained deterrence against the United States—a remarkable achievement, given the disparity of capabilities.



The Trump administration's recent campaign in Yemen accomplished two things: first, it applied, for the first time, genuine pressure on Houthi leadership to cease their activities—seemingly successfully, although it remains to be seen how the ceasefire deal plays out. Second, it signaled to Iran that the United States is no longer more concerned about the possibilities of escalation than the achievement of key national security policy objectives. Opening the Bab-el-Mandeb is a key objective: we are a maritime nation, and free and open passage on the global commons is a fundamental requirement for our economy.

It is telling that, considering the violence of the U.S. campaign, Iran did not respond. Recent Iranian pronouncements have tried to [distance](#) the regime in Tehran from Houthi activities. While Iran [supports](#) the Houthis in every way and applauds the effects they have obtained against global commerce, it did not hazard regime survival to stand beside them.

## CURRENT BASING STRUCTURE IN THE CENTCOM AOR



## Iran's Nuclear Program

And yet, there is more. When it comes to state-sponsored terrorist activities in the region, all roads lead back to Tehran. Iranian state sponsorship of violent extremism, coupled with its flirtation with possessing a nuclear weapons capability, conjoin to make Iran a uniquely dangerous opponent. It has become a truism to opine that “now” is a particularly important time for the Middle East. Because of the combination of recklessness and weakness that Iran’s foreign policy has demonstrated over the past year, this hackneyed concept may now actually be valid.

As a nation, we have opportunities and options about how to proceed with Iran. It begins with the military option. It is within our ability to severely damage the Iranian nuclear program, setting it back many months. It is probably not within our ability to completely eradicate the program. The time for that passed in 2012 or so. Alternatively, with or without our cooperation, Israel could strike the program. Its attack will be less decisive than ours, simply because the United States possesses unique capabilities that Israel does not have. We could even attack together. As a military planner, I feel keenly the window of opportunity that is open before us. It will not stay open forever. Over time, the Iranians will replace their air defenses, and they will further [dig in](#) their deep tunnels and nuclear architecture. Opportunity in moments like this occur once in a generation. Today, we can strike with high probability of qualified success, and Iran’s options to retaliate against Israel are very limited. We may need to revisit these targets with some frequency, because it is possible that the Iranians will continue to pursue a nuclear weapon, even after a strike on their program.

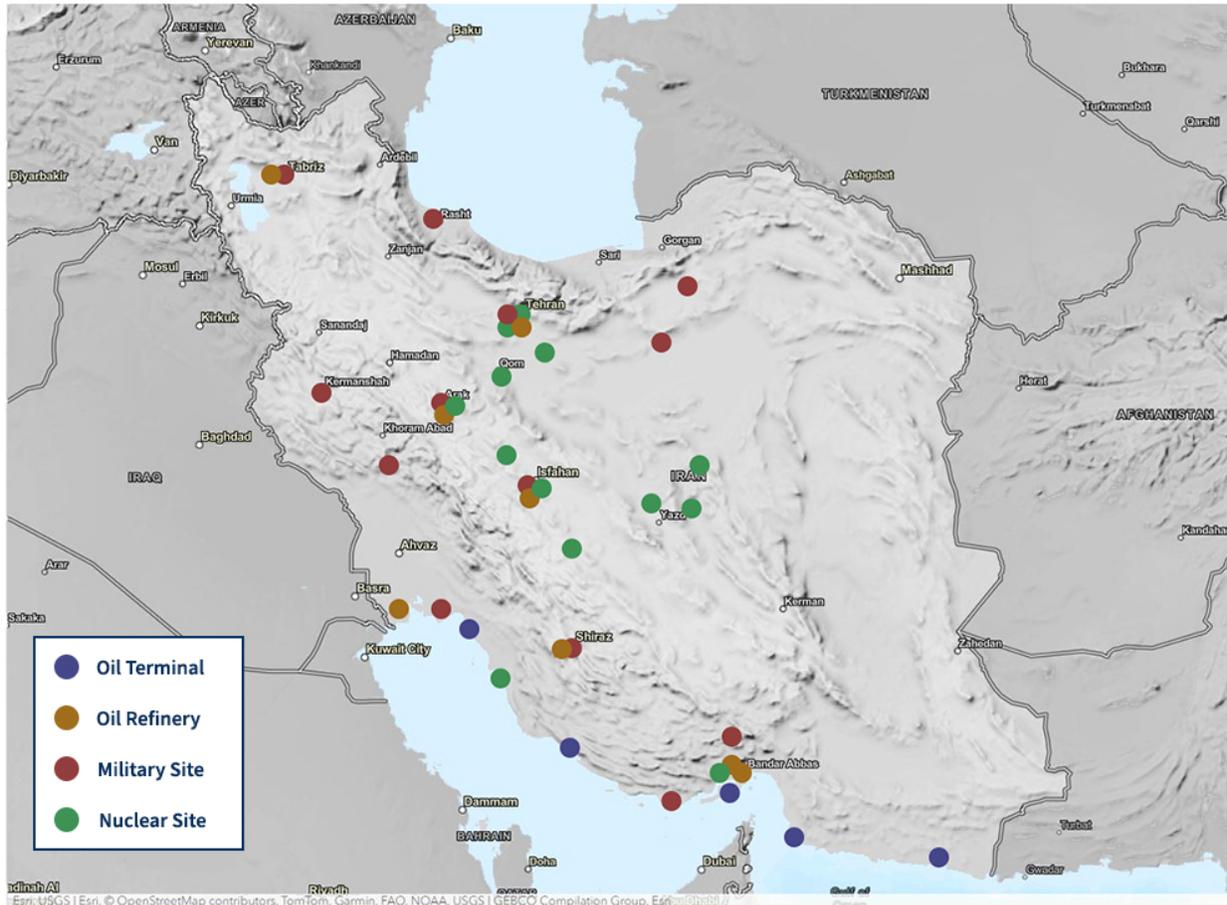
Should the Iranians choose to respond, they will have problems striking Israel, but they would be able to hit Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and even targets within Iraq with short-range missiles and drones in such numbers that defenses could be [overwhelmed](#). This could [include](#) our large basing structure in the region, putting U.S. service men and women in the line of fire. Should this happen, the region will descend into a massive war of fires, with cities ablaze. We can respond effectively to such an Iranian attack, and there is little doubt that we would eventually prevail, but it would take time. Meanwhile, the pressure on Gulf countries will be immense to end the conflict, perhaps on terms not advantageous to our interests. Such a possibility would need to be closely managed at the national level.

Such a wider war as this could end only with regime change in Iran. There are many ways to strike the ruling elites in Tehran, and not all of these require direct strikes on leadership— although that should never be off the table. Oil production, distillation, and distribution networks are vulnerable, and their loss would cause the Iranian economy to grind to a halt quickly. The architecture of repression— Republican Guard headquarters—could be struck. Electrical power generation, transmission, and distribution systems are also key vulnerabilities. Sustained action against these targets would make it very hard to govern Iran.

This fact should be a key component of our diplomatic messaging. Iranian recognition of this fact, and their knowledge that there is “a new sheriff in town” in Washington, would mute their response to a

strike on their nuclear program. Regime preservation, not possession of a nuclear weapon, remains their most important goal.

# Potential Strategic Targets in Iran



## Recommendations

Because of the clear strength shown by the Trump administration, the threat to regime survival is now very much in play. Every strike against the Houthis [resonated](#) in Tehran. There is now a clear opportunity to force Iran to yet again “drink from the poisoned chalice,” and to accept verifiable limitations on their nuclear program and support for proxies.

In the long run, we should seek a politically stable, non-nuclear Iran that does not meddle in the affairs of its neighbors and is a responsible member of the family of nations, respecting all relevant

international agreements and treaties. This is a long-term play, which in the near term is, of course, aspirational. The things we should seek in the short term are that the Iranians:

- Renounce their nuclear weapons program and adopt genuinely verifiable means to ensure that we can be certain this has happened.

A much harder set of objectives for subsequent negotiation would be for them to:

- End their sponsorship of terrorist proxy groups across the region; and
- Cease calling for the destruction of the State of Israel as a fundamental goal of Iranian foreign policy, and undertake actions that demonstrate this in deeds, not just words.

There is a caution here: the Iranians aren't particularly effective fighters, but they are master negotiators. They will seek to bog us down in negotiations that avoid central issues, playing for time. To negotiate with Iran, we must be willing to apply the stick without hesitation and not allow them to deploy a negotiating strategy where we may be talking to people who do not actually speak for the regime. This tactic has been used to [great effect](#) by the Iranians against the United States in prior negotiations.

That is why achieving these goals will require operating from a position of strength, not weakness, across the Middle East. We have begun to walk down this path. To take advantage of this remarkable confluence of events, we need to be bold.

### **1. Force Posture**

We must commit to maintaining an adequate force posture in the region. Our poorly messaged and widely publicized [drawdowns](#), coupled with an almost-invisible campaign against the Houthis, have given [comfort](#) to our enemies, while [discouraging](#) our friends. We need to end this ping-pong approach and commit to a realistic and sustainable force presence and not just hope we can get by with a minimal military presence in the Middle East. Some of this can be solved by *assigning* forces to CENTCOM. Currently, the vast majority of CENTCOM's forces are permanently based out of the region. This requires a rotational base of at least two and sometimes three units for every element that is deployed. This huge overhead can be significantly reduced by basing them in the region, as is done in the European and Indo-Pacific Commands. The size of this force is open to debate; more important will be the messaging—public and private—that surrounds it.

### **2. Maximum Economic Pressure**

Second, we need to actually implement the various economic sanctions that are in effect against Iran, particularly hydrocarbons. For the past four years, we have chosen to disregard Iran's active efforts to [thwart](#) our sanctions, particularly in regard to oil exports to China. This must stop.

### **3. Hold Regime at Risk**

Most importantly, we need to message Iran that further attacks against Israel, or our other friends in the region, or our basing structure, either from Iran, or from their proxies, will be met by strikes directly against the regime, and those institutions it needs to remain in power. This messaging needs

to be unequivocal and cannot be paired with statements about the primacy of [avoiding escalation](#) as done during the Biden administration. A portion of this messaging should explicitly warn Iran that achieving “breakout” in nuclear weapons development will result in an immediate strike against its nuclear enterprise.

If these goals can be met, then the door should be open to a vast and comprehensive easing of sanctions, and a return to normalcy. We should be willing to pledge that we will not undertake actions to destabilize the Iranian regime, whatever its characteristics. These are broad goals, and they will require a firmness of messaging and force that we have not consistently displayed for several years. If we are willing to take advantage of current circumstances, so auspicious for our interests, and so gloomy for theirs, Iran will drink from the chalice again. It is within our grasp – because of the credibility this administration brings to the table.