

Fall, Fall is Better than Jaw, Jaw: The Folly of Negotiating with Iran Now

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The Trump administration wants to be rid of the Iranian regime and negotiate with it, too. It cannot have it both ways. Worse, in trying to have it both ways, the administration is likely to end up getting neither of its objectives. It should abandon its plans to engage in futile nuclear talks—which would only strengthen and embolden Iran's regime while undermining U.S. credibility and leverage—and instead commit itself to a policy of regime collapse.

Over more than two weeks, as Iranians bravely took to the streets to demand an end to the oppressive Islamic Republic, President Donald Trump did what no other U.S. president had done in 47 years: stood with them, recognized their demands for freedom, offered American help, and threatened military intervention if the regime “start[s] killing people.” Yet, by January 14, after the regime had already slaughtered thousands of its own people in an attempt to put down the uprising, Trump backtracked, claiming that “the killing is stopped” and that, therefore, instead of acting, “we’re going to watch and see what happens.”

Reporting suggests that at least some of Trump’s hesitation was due to uncertainty about whether the United States was adequately prepared to conduct an effective operation against the Iranian regime. This included a lack of offensive capabilities, given the absence of any carrier strike group in the region, as well as inadequate air and missile defenses to protect U.S. troops and partners against threatened Iranian retaliation. These factors likely amplified Trump’s concern—and gave him further time to ponder—whether the United States could strike a truly regime-ending blow.

Even though Trump decided against military action at the time, his rationale, together with his own urging of protestors to “TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS,” suggests that, at least in mid-January, the president was focused on toppling the Islamic Republic.

Even as the United States has spent three weeks moving military assets into the region, however, the administration began signaling that it was changing tack. Officials began declaring their interest in reaching a diplomatic agreement with Iran. And, now, the United States is gearing up for negotiations slated for February 6. The Trump administration envisions these talks as focusing, at most, on Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs as well as its support for terrorism. U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff indicated that a deal with Iran would need to address four key issues: “(1) nuclear enrichment, (2) missiles — they have to cut back on their inventory; (3) the actual [nuclear] material that they have, which is roughly 2000 kilograms enriched anywhere between 3.67 percent and 60%; and (4) the proxies.” Trump himself has indicated an even more limited U.S. focus, posting that “hopefully Iran will quickly ‘Come to the Table’ and negotiate a fair and equitable deal – NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS – one that is good for all parties. Time is running out, it is truly of the essence! As I told Iran once before, MAKE A DEAL!”

The administration appears to think that these two policies—the previous threat to act against the regime and the current negotiations—are two sides of the same coin, the stick and the carrot. As Trump recently put it, “We have ships heading to Iran right now, big ones — the biggest and the best — and we have talks going on with Iran and we’ll see how it all works out...if we can work something out, that would be great and if we can’t, probably bad things would happen.”

There is a strong logic to this approach. As former Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs and JNSA Distinguished Fellow Ron Dermer has put it, the only way that Iran would give up its queen is if its king is held at risk. The credible threat of military action against the institutions that keep the Islamic Republic in power, Dermer explained, was the only way to convince it to make concessions on its nuclear program.

But while that logic held before, it has since been attenuated. Threatening the queen worked before the 12-Day War. Before the Iranians’ January uprising. And before Trump’s unenforced redline. A different logic applies now.

First, Trump’s threat of military force is much less credible today than it was in mid-January. Operation Rising Lion and Midnight Hammer dramatically bolstered American credibility, especially given that Iran had clearly believed, right up until June 13, 2025, that Trump would neither take military action himself nor even allow Israel to do so. That is why Iran dragged out negotiations in early 2025, refusing to even meet directly with U.S. negotiators or concede any of their demands. But despite all that accrued credibility, when Trump drew his redline at the killing of protestors in early January, the Iranian regime ignored him nevertheless, making the streets of Tehran, Mashad, Rasht, Isfahan, and hundreds of other cities run red with the blood of Iranian protestors demanding their freedom. And if Trump’s military threats were disregarded then, they have even less credibility after January 14, when he abandoned his own redline. Having believed that the protests were U.S.-Israeli attempts to overthrow it, the regime now believes it successfully called Trump’s bluff and staved off military pressure. Now Iran is even more certain that, once again, the United States prefers deescalation to confrontation.

Second, the nuclear program—and even more so Iran’s ballistic missile arsenal—is no longer just the queen. It is the shield of the Islamic Republic. Dermer’s logic applied when the mullahs in Tehran believed that the biggest threat to their survival was external, the United States and the international community threatening their power with economic strangulation or military action. If they could reach an agreement that would preclude either of those threats, the Iranian regime might have reasoned back then, they could survive without a nuclear weapon.

But the largest threat to the regime now comes from within—the millions of Iranians who no longer are willing to tolerate its oppression, corruption, mismanagement, and hypocrisy. The only hope the Islamic Republic has of surviving is brutal suppression of the protests, and it can only do so if shielded by the capability to dissuade external support for the Iranian people. If the Islamic Republic were to agree to give up its nuclear weapons program, ballistic missiles, and support for proxies, as Witkoff has demanded, it would stand naked in front of the international community and collapse soon after. And it would stand naked at home, after years of vowing never to relinquish its nuclear ambitions and demanding its people sacrifice themselves as pawns, enduring whatever hardships needed to retain the queen. Which is why it will never strike the deal that Trump seeks, no matter how big the U.S. ships heading to Iran are—sacrificing the queen will no longer save the king but doom him.

Third, the nuclear clock looks very different now than it did eight months ago. The threat posed by the Islamic Republic has never been just its nuclear program, it has always been the regime itself. So long as a regime founded upon its determination to kill Americans and Jews, a parasite

on one of the largest and most advanced societies in the region, existed in the heart of the Middle East, neither the region nor the United States would ever be safe. However, when Iran was on the precipice of a nuclear weapons capability—its breakout time measured in just days—and the collapse of the Islamic Republic seemed far off, it made sense to prioritize stopping its nuclear program. But that situation is now reversed. The 12-Day War did not eliminate Iran's nuclear program but it set back the clock significantly. In the meantime, the Iranian people themselves sped up the clock on the regime's demise. It is now not just possible, but likely, that the regime will implode before it can excavate the enriched uranium buried by American bombs and rebuild the centrifuges destroyed by Israeli ones.

It thus makes little strategic sense to pursue a nuclear deal, when a much more comprehensive solution to advance U.S. interests is within reach. Not only that, but the pursuit of a deal helps strengthen the Islamic Republic, pushing off the possibility of regime collapse. Engaging in talks would feed the regime's conviction that it compelled Trump to stand down by brutally suppressing the protests and threatening to retaliate against U.S. and Israeli targets. Diplomacy also signals U.S. acceptance of the regime's legitimacy, betraying the trust of protestors who took to the streets at Trump's urging, believing that U.S. help really was on the way. These negotiations, thus, might very well discourage further protests, as Iranians might rightly surmise that, if they stand up to the regime, they'll be standing alone. And, should a deal somehow be reached, or, worse yet, Iranian negotiators convince the United States to grant some sanctions relief as a sign of good faith, the regime will get an economic shot in the arm, allowing it to buy off dissenters and keep itself on life support.

The Trump administration, therefore, cannot have it both ways. It cannot both seek the Islamic Republic's demise and negotiate with it. Nor can it expect that its threats of military action will compel Iranian nuclear concessions. By pursuing both, it is instead most likely to end up with none: a stronger Islamic Republic and no nuclear deal.

It should, instead, forswear talks or any action that would legitimize or strengthen the Iranian regime. It would do better to commit itself to the objective of regime collapse, while rebuilding its credibility. That should start by belatedly enforcing its own redline and striking Iranian regime targets—particularly the infrastructure of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps responsible for committing atrocities against the Iranian people—as well as Iranian missile infrastructure, with which it holds the rest of the region hostage. The administration should then commit itself to simultaneously exerting maximum pressure on the regime and maximum support for the Iranian people. The former can include a quarantine of Iranian oil exports, covert disruption of regime command-and-control and communications systems, and a campaign aimed at promoting regime defections. The latter should focus on enabling unfettered communications inside Iran, funding and assisting the organization of opposition groups, and even the providing of arms inside Iran.

The administration cannot have it both ways on Iran. But it can still abandon talks and embrace regime collapse.