

Origins of the Iran Deal

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As we await release of the actual text of the U.S.-Iran agreement, it is worth stepping back to assess how we got to this point. It began with President Donald Trump commendably, in partnership with Israel, building significant leverage over Iran through effective military operations beginning on February 28. Then, starting with the April 8 ceasefire, President Trump consistently relinquished that hard-earned leverage. Whatever the agreement is, it is likely far worse for the United States than it needed to be.

In 38 days of war, beginning on February 28, the United States and Israel decapitated Iran's leadership and pummeled its missile and drone arsenals, defense industry, air defenses, and navy. The Iran regime was on its back and in disarray, and CENTCOM Commander, Admiral Brad Cooper, sought to continue another couple weeks of attacks.

But then President Trump agreed to a ceasefire, and the regime in Tehran was saved. It marked the beginning of the erosion of American leverage over Iran to get an acceptable deal. The Iranian regime was less likely to make concessions when the U.S.-Israeli bombing stopped than it was during the war. Indeed, Iran didn't even abide by the ceasefire. Trump conditioned the ceasefire on the ["complete, immediate and safe opening"](#) of the Strait of Hormuz, but Iran didn't clear mines, often attacked U.S. bases and energy facilities in Arab neighbors, and demanded that it control and get fees for any ships transiting--making the strait far from open. The U.S. military did ensure some non-Iranian tankers got through, and Trump imposed on April 13 a blockade on Iranian ports, which was onerous on Tehran but overhyped in potential effect and didn't force the regime to make concessions.

It was bad enough that Trump did not hit Iran hard for these violations. Worse yet, he undermined U.S. credibility and deterrence by not enforcing a specific longstanding U.S. policy to ensure freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, as my colleague John Hannah recently [explained](#). Jimmy Carter declared in 1980 that no power could control the Persian Gulf, but Trump effectively permitted it. An emboldened Iran, and everyone else, now knows it retains tremendous leverage by its ability to damage the global economy by stopping the flow of oil and liquid natural gas through the Strait of Hormuz, without significant blowback.

Trump further undermined U.S. leverage by conceding Iran's effective veto over Lebanon. Trump publicly expressed his concern that the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict would stand in the way of a deal with Iran, as Tehran had warned. When Hezbollah fired on Israeli towns, he tried to stop

Israel from responding. He then doubled down by restraining Israel's retaliation when Iran fired missiles at Israel. Instead of giving in to Iranian threats, Trump would have enhanced America's position with Iran by supporting Israel's self-defense.

Trump made things worse by publicly criticizing and belittling Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, saying he, Trump, alone was calling the shots. This was an inappropriate way to treat his close wartime ally, and it permitted Iran to drive a wedge between the United States and Israel, which fought so effectively during the 38 days of combat. Other allies, and potential allies, undoubtedly noted this.

Last week, when Iran downed a U.S. Army Apache helicopter with a drone, while the American helicopter pilots miraculously avoided being killed, the United States responded only mildly.

Coupled with constant threats over the last couple months against Iran followed by quick backdowns with promises that a deal was around the corner--all these actions and inactions tanked American leverage. They suggested to all that Trump was desperate for a deal and fearful of resuming military action, thereby emboldening Iran in its demands.

Trump further undermined U.S. leverage by ignoring a key lever: the Iranian people. The trigger for this war was Trump's promise to the Iranian people that "help was the way" after the regime massacred 40,000 Iranian demonstrators in January. Again, at the start of the war, he made regime collapse a key objective and promised that Iranians' time to seize their fate was nigh. Yet, his public determination to seek a deal legitimized the Tehran regime and signaled he had abandoned regime collapse, demoralizing the Iranian people. They are now less likely to rise up again to overthrow the Islamic Republic, which would be a tremendous strategic and moral gain for the United States. Indeed, it is the Iranian people who will issue the final verdict on this war.

It is not just Iran that has benefited from Trump's desperation for a deal over the past two months. American weakness means China has gained. It's a shocking reversal for America's position after Trump had commendably and courageously approved the use of B-2s in the 12-Day War, the removal of Venezuela's Maduro, and then Operation Epic Fury.

The last time the United States substantially undermined its credibility on the world stage was President Biden's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. It led to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Barring a Trump reversal on Iran, what will be the consequences this time?