



## TRUMP 2.0 AND IRAN: NO DEAL IS THE BEST DEAL

by

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Donald Trump's return to the White House coincides with a critical juncture for US-Iran relations, presenting a compelling case for maintaining maximum pressure rather than seeking a new deal. Domestically, the Iranian regime faces [mounting](#) public discontent fuelled by spiraling inflation, internal repression, and systemic corruption. Without sanctions relief or meaningful diplomatic engagement, these pressures are only likely to intensify.

Regionally, Tehran's ability to project power has eroded as its "[forward defense](#)" strategy falters amid devastating Israeli strikes on its key proxies and the fall of Assad's regime in Syria. Still, there are voices inside Iran, like former diplomat [Hamid Abutalebi](#) or former head of the Parliament [Ali Larijani](#), who suggest that Trump's transactional approach could offer opportunities for a new deal between Tehran and the West if Tehran plays its cards tactfully.

### Nothing Left to Exchange

However, this optimism overlooks a critical reality: Tehran's dire lack of anything substantial or valuable to offer the United States in exchange for sanctions relief. Iran's demands are predictable: sanctions removal, an end to Israeli strikes on its assets, and a cessation of hostilities in Lebanon and Palestine. Yet, given its deteriorated position, it is unclear what, if any, Tehran can provide in return that would be of strategic benefit to Washington.

[Reports](#) suggest that the latest Israeli strikes have completely dismantled Tehran's ability to produce long range ballistic missiles for at least a year while Tehran's regional proxies – Hezbollah and Hamas – have been severely weakened to the point that they are no longer in a position to pose [sustained](#) threats to Israel in the short to medium term. Hezbollah,

moreover, faces significant risks to its own security and the stability of its recent ceasefire with Israel if it escalates hostilities on Tehran's behalf.

Militias in [Iraq](#) and the [Houthis](#) in Yemen, meanwhile, simply lack the resources and/or strategic depth to influence Israel's security dynamics in the same way the Hezbollah could before the war. Further, the Houthis [operate](#) with relative autonomy, pursuing their own political agendas rather than acting as direct agents of Tehran. The sudden [fall](#) of Assad, most importantly, [spells](#) the end of the Axis of Resistance leaving Iran more isolated than ever. Assad's regime had long [served](#) as the linchpin connecting Tehran with its proxies in Lebanon and Palestine, and thus its collapse eliminates a critical conduit for Iranian influence.

In the absence of Assad, Iran's regional position has been reduced to near-complete isolation void of any credible allies to counterbalance the overwhelming pressure from its adversaries. This would not only destabilize Iran's regional posture but it might also energize the Iranian public who may draw inspiration from Syrian rebels' victory and stage their own protests.

### Challenges for the Regime

Amid these challenges, elements within Iran's leadership appear to be [revisiting](#) the nuclear option, viewing it as a potential deterrent to safeguard sovereignty. To an extent, this shift ought not to be surprising; it simply reflects the influence of a [younger generation of Iranian elites](#), often educated in ideological institutions like the Imam Sadegh University, and arguably inspired by North Korea's example of leveraging nuclear capabilities to secure regime survival.

However, any move toward nuclear armament would trigger severe international repercussions. It would provide Israel with a justification for preemptive strikes, likely with U.S. support, as Trump himself emphasized during his campaign on October 4 [stating](#) that, unlike Biden, he would have advised Israel to



“hit the nuclear first and worry about the rest later.” Iran’s capacity to counter such strikes effectively remains limited, underscoring the risks of pursuing this path which may even bolster UAE’s territorial claims over the contested islands in the Strait of Hormuz.

In other words, any move towards the development of a bomb would not bode well for the regime’s ultimate goal – its survival and maintaining its hold on power – by providing Israel, and indeed the international community, with the perfect pretext for framing a preemptive strike on Iran’s nuclear sites as an essential preventive measure.

### No Love Lost with Trump

Adding to these dynamics is the deep animosity between Trump and Iran’s leadership. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s longstanding opposition to engagement with the U.S., combined with the political capital he has invested in [glorifying](#) Qassem Soleimani, makes a deal with Trump almost inconceivable. At a time when the regime’s investment in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza has turned into a complete failure, engaging with a president linked to Soleimani’s assassination could severely undermine not only Khamenei’s credibility but also that of the entire conservative camp. This risk is particularly significant as Tehran faces the prospect of a post-Khamenei era.

Hence, while President Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Araqchi have signaled interest in reviving nuclear talks, their ability to meaningfully engage in such talks remain, at best, questionable.

Ultimately, Iran finds itself at a strategic crossroads, constrained by dwindling regional influence and escalating domestic unrest. Given these dynamics, the Trump administration has every reason to avoid a deal unless Tehran is prepared to substantially overhaul its domestic and regional policies. Some might counter by arguing that further isolation would make Iran more unpredictable.

However, Tehran’s options are limited. Its proxies are fighting for their own survival, and thus they cannot be used as surrogates. Alternatively, Tehran could opt for the bomb and/or carrying out indiscriminate strikes against U.S. and/or commercial targets in the Persian Gulf. However, both of these would be nothing short of an open invitation for devastating strikes inside Iran.

Given the regime’s track record, above all, there ought to be no doubt that any deal or financial relief would simply enable it to recuperate, restructure and continue with carrying out its destructive policies including its support for Russia’s illegal war in Ukraine; that is, the deal will have next to no positive outcome for the Iranian public. As such, now is not the time for compromise. Rather, it is a moment for strategic patience in order to enable the impact of sanctions and diplomatic isolation to strain the Iranian regime further potentially pushing it toward a breaking point.

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