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Trump's Negotiations with Iran: Exit Strategy or Bluff?

Unit for Political Studies

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Trump's Negotiations with Iran:

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On 23 March 2026, US President Donald Trump abruptly walked back a threat he had made just two days earlier, when he warned that the United States would “hit and obliterate” Iranian power stations, “starting with the biggest one first”, if Iran did not reopen the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours.¹ Just hours before this deadline expired, Trump announced a five-day postponement of potential US strikes on Iranian energy facilities. He attributed this to “good and productive” talks between Washington and Tehran,² noting that the two sides had agreed on a 15-point plan and expressing a preference for joint arrangements between the United States and Iran to manage the Strait of Hormuz.³

Trump insisted that Washington was negotiating with “the most respected and the leader” within the Iranian system, claiming that it was not Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, and that Tehran had initiated the talks. However, Iran categorically denied any direct negotiations with the United States, dismissing his statements as an attempt to manipulate financial and oil markets.⁴ The Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, also denied reports that he was engaged in talks with US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner.⁵ It is more likely that Trump was referring to messages conveyed from Washington to Tehran via third parties, including Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan, which Iran does not regard as formal negotiations. Trump appears to view war as a continuation of negotiation, and negotiation as an extension of coercion imposed by war: under the logic of power politics in which, if the adversary does not yield to terms dictated by force, further force is applied.

What Is Driving the “Shift” in the US Position?

Donald Trump was prompted to extend the deadline he had given to Iran due to three main factors, notwithstanding the possibility that his decision forms part of a decoy or strategic misdirection, pending the arrival of additional US forces in the region. Trump has previously resorted to such deception twice during earlier negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear programme: first in June 2025, when Israel launched a military strike on Iran before Washington swiftly joined the air campaign; and again in late February during the current US–Israeli offensive.

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- ¹ “Trump Threatens to ‘Obliterate’ Iran’s Power Plants as Iran Strikes 2 Israeli Cities,” *NPR*, 22/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9wb>
 - ² Michael Birnbaum, “Trump Says U.S. is Postponing Strikes as it Negotiates End to War with Iran,” *The Washington Post*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Jz>
 - ³ Adam Rasgon, Julian E. Barnes, and Farnaz Fassihi, “United States Said to Have Sent Iran a Plan to End the Middle East War,” *New York Times*, 24/3/26, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Hw>
 - ⁴ Ben Bartenstein et al., “Trump Began Iran Talks as Allies Warned War Risked Disaster,” *Bloomberg*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9KD>
 - ⁵ Barak Ravid, “Trump: U.S. Negotiating with Senior Iranian Official,” *Axios*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9RW>

I: Allied Pressure

It is evident that the Trump administration has received warnings from its Gulf allies that carrying out threats to target Iranian energy infrastructure would likely prompt Tehran to follow through on its threats to launch retaliatory attacks against energy facilities in their countries.⁶ There are also concerns that inflicting lasting damage on Iran's infrastructure could result in a failed state in the aftermath of the conflict.⁷ It appears that a regional actor has succeeded in opening a new communication channel with the Iranian leadership following Israel's assassination of Ali Larijani, who had been viewed as a potential interlocutor in any negotiations to end the war. When Trump issued his 21 March ultimatum threatening strikes on Iranian energy facilities unless the Strait of Hormuz was reopened, he was reportedly informed of a communication channel that could lead to negotiations, encouraging him to grant a five-day extension. Pakistan subsequently offered to host high-level US–Iran talks following contacts with both Washington and Tehran. Meanwhile, Qatar, Oman, Turkey, France, and the United Kingdom engaged through back channels to encourage negotiations – an approach Washington appears to have accepted.⁸

II: Containing Political and Economic Fallout

Trump's decision to delay strikes on Iranian energy facilities may also reflect an attempt to calm markets shaken by his threats and the ongoing war, and to manage oil prices, which have nearly doubled since the launch of the war – an outcome that could negatively affect Trump's Republican Party in the forthcoming midterm elections. Trump hinted at this when he stated: "The price of oil will drop like a rock, as soon as a deal is done... Now we have a very serious chance of making a deal".⁹ The announcement of the extension came shortly before US markets opened, leading to an immediate drop in Brent crude prices and a rise in the S&P 500 index and US Treasury bonds.¹⁰

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that on 20 March, the Trump administration released a 30-day sanctions waiver allowing the sale and trading of Iranian crude already loaded on tankers at sea. According to US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, the measure forms part of a strategy to ease global supply pressures that have intensified since the war began.¹¹ Washington also temporarily eased sanctions on Russian oil to inject additional supply into markets. Trump was explicit about his reasoning, saying: "I just want to have as much oil in the system as possible... You have ships that are

6 Tobias Siegal & Sam Halpern, "Trump Says US had 'Very Good Talks' with Iran to End War, Gives Five-day Deadline," *The Jerusalem Post*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Av>

7 Bartenstein et al.

8 Summer Said et al., "The Back-channel Diplomacy Behind Trump's U-turn on Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9pR>

9 Aamer Madhani, "Trump says US and Iran are talking. His claim is eliciting market cheers and plenty of skepticism", *The Washington Post*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9AW>

10 Bartenstein et al.

11 Steve Benen, "Trump, Bessent Struggle to Defend Easing of Iranian Oil Sanctions Amid a War," *MS Now*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba18>



out there that are loaded up with oil – rather than keep it there, I'd rather see it go to the system... Any small amount of money Iran gets is not gonna make a difference in this war".¹²

III: Creating Space for a Diplomatic Solution

Of course, it is also possible that Trump is seeking an exit, particularly after the failure of key assumptions underpinning the war – foremost among them the expectation of regime collapse or surrender. He appears to be betting that military pressure could push elements within the Iranian leadership towards negotiations, as in Venezuela. However, developments in Iran suggest otherwise. Trump may also be searching for a diplomatic way out of a prolonged Middle Eastern war – one he has himself long criticized – especially given that the conflict has already cost the United States more than \$25 billion, with the Department of Defense requesting a further \$200 billion from Congress.¹³ Nevertheless, the prospects for a rapid agreement between Washington and Tehran appear limited, given Trump's insistence on Iran's acceptance of his conditions.

IV: Deception and Misdirection

A fourth possibility is that the new deadline may itself serve as cover for further US military advances.¹⁴ This assessment is supported not only by the precedents set in June 2025 and February 2026, but also by developments on the ground. On 24 March, the US Department of Defense ordered approximately 2,000 troops from the 82nd Airborne Division's Immediate Response Force to deploy to the Middle East, both to increase pressure on Iran and to expand military options, coinciding with his launch of a new "diplomatic" initiative with Iran.¹⁵ Together with roughly 4,500 Marines already en route, the number of additional ground forces deployed since the start of the conflict rises to around 7,000, indicating potential escalation.¹⁶ The Marine unit may be tasked with two missions: seizing Iran's Kharg Island – home to critical oil infrastructure through which roughly 90% of Iranian oil exports pass – and helping secure the Strait of Hormuz by controlling adjacent Iranian coastlines.

Inaccurate Assumptions and Conflicting Calculations

The Trump administration faces a series of dilemmas in its approach to the war, most notably the absence of a clear strategy for ending it and the collapse of many of the assumptions on which it was based. While differences between US and Israeli priorities remain limited, they do not undermine the broader alliance. Despite Trump's public optimism about a possible diplomatic breakthrough, his

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lisa Mascaro & Kevin Freking, "Pentagon Seeks \$200 Billion in Additional Funds for the Iran War, AP Source Says," *Associated Press*, 19/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Bafl>

¹⁴ Bartenstein et al.

¹⁵ Paul McLeary, "Pentagon Prepares to Send another 3,000 Troops to Middle East," *Politico*, 24/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9kQ>

¹⁶ Eric Schmitt, "Around 2,000 U.S. Paratroopers to be Sent to the Middle East," *The New York Times*, 24/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9wX>



administration continues to reinforce its military posture in the region amid an unclear definition of “victory”. Notably, Trump has oscillated between calling on NATO allies and countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and India to help secure maritime navigation through the Strait of Hormuz – on the grounds that they depend most on its oil flows – before later declaring that the United States required no assistance after they declined, only to revert again to threats of striking Iranian infrastructure, then retreating and granting Tehran more time. Meanwhile, US military reinforcements continue to arrive in the region, even though it was the war itself that effectively disrupted navigation through the Strait.

There are growing indications that the United States may be drifting into a prolonged conflict of the kind Trump had vehemently opposed during his election campaigns – based on flawed assumptions promoted by Israel. Chief among these was the belief, reportedly conveyed by Benjamin Netanyahu, that eliminating Iran’s political and military leadership would trigger mass protests leading to regime collapse. Encouraged by Netanyahu to “make history,” Trump took the decision on 27 February to launch the war under the banner of a large-scale military operation.¹⁷ However, the assassination of Ali Khamenei and senior Iranian officials did not lead to the regime’s collapse, nor did it replicate the Venezuelan model – an outcome US intelligence assessments had reportedly warned of, but which Trump disregarded.¹⁸ He also appears to have underestimated the war’s impact on the Gulf states and the risk of regional escalation.

Given the prevailing lack of trust, the new deadline is unlikely to alter the mood in Tehran or produce the kind of flexibility Trump hopes for. The Iranian leadership sees little reason to believe that either the United States or Israel would honour any future agreement.¹⁹ Ghalibaf has stated that this is not a time for negotiations, emphasizing unity behind the leadership in responding to aggression.²⁰ This further diminishes the likelihood of installing an alternative leadership figure within Iran akin to Delcy Rodríguez in Venezuela.

Complicating matters further for Trump are Israeli efforts to undermine any negotiations with Iran – such as the targeting of Ali Larijani – and its strong preference for destroying Iranian energy infrastructure, thereby weakening the regime and potentially drawing Gulf states deeper into the conflict by provoking retaliatory dynamics. Despite Netanyahu’s claim that Trump informed him of a possible agreement with Iran, he remains sceptical of Tehran’s willingness to meet US demands and continues to view continued war as the only viable option.²¹ While Washington insists on its

¹⁷ Erin Banco, Gram Slattery & Maayan Lubell, “Trump Approved Iran Operation after Netanyahu Argued for Joint Killing of Khamenei, Sources Say,” *Reuters*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9UJ>

¹⁸ Dan De Luce, “U.S. Intelligence Chiefs’ Testimony is out of Sync with Trump’s Talking Points,” *NBC News*, 20/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba2D>

¹⁹ Dasha Burns, Eli Stokols & Diana Nerozzi, “‘We’re in the Testing Phase’: Trump Admin Eyeing Iran’s Parliament Speaker as US-backed Leader,” *Politico*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba15>

²⁰ Saber Ghol Anbari, “Ghalibaf Denies Negotiations with Washington,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BaaT>

²¹ Tara Suter, “Netanyahu Says Trump Sees Opportunity for Deal with Iran,” *The Hill*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba6E>

conditions – including the unconditional reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, freezing Iran’s missile programme, halting uranium enrichment, and dismantling its regional network – Iran has set its own prerequisites: guarantees against renewed war, reparations for damages, and formal recognition of the aggression against it, alongside the full lifting of sanctions.²² It also refuses to relinquish its right to a peaceful nuclear programme or accept any restrictions on its missile capabilities.

Conclusion

It is difficult to determine whether the chances of reaching an agreement between United States and Iran to end the war have improved following Donald Trump’s decision to extend the deadline for striking Iranian energy facilities. Trump speaks of “serious and promising opportunities” for a deal, and reports suggest that Tehran may be willing to negotiate with Vice President JD Vance – rather than with Special Envoy Steve Witkoff or the president’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, owing to a “lack of trust” following the collapse of talks prior to the US–Israeli attack.²³ But the plan put forward by the Trump administration via Pakistan amounts, in effect, to an instrument of surrender. The White House has warned Iran that, should it reject the proposal, it will proceed with its threat to strike Iranian energy facilities and to seize the Strait of Hormuz and Kharg Island. The plan comprises 15 provisions to end the war, centred on the complete dismantling of Iran’s nuclear capabilities: halting uranium enrichment on Iranian soil; transferring enriched material to the International Atomic Energy Agency; decommissioning and destroying facilities at Natanz, Isfahan, and Fordow; and granting the Agency full access to all nuclear-related information and activities within Iran. The proposal also requires Iran to abandon its regional axis and allied networks, and to keep the Strait of Hormuz open as an international maritime passage that cannot be closed. The missile file would be addressed at a later stage, with restrictions imposed on numbers and range and their use confined to “self-defence.” In return, Washington would commit to lifting all sanctions on Iran, assisting in the development of a civilian nuclear project in Bushehr for electricity generation, and removing the threat of reactivating the “snapback” mechanism.²⁴

It is difficult to imagine Tehran accepting such terms, which would strip it of the limited sources of leverage it retains in the face of any future aggression. Should Iran reject what it views as surrender conditions, Trump would face a genuine dilemma. Continuing the war in the absence of a clear definition of “victory,” or without achieving a diplomatic breakthrough aligned with the conditions of both Washington and Tel Aviv, could draw the United States into a prolonged war of attrition, entailing deep and prolonged involvement in the Middle East of the kind Trump has long described

²² Ahmed Mreisi, “Conditions or Manoeuvre? Behind the Scenes of the Mediation Between Washington and Tehran and Tel Aviv’s Position,” *Al Jazeera*, 23/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9J4>

²³ “Report: Iran Wants to Negotiate with Vance, not Kushner or Witkoff,” *The Economist Times*, 25/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9Bail>

²⁴ “Washington sends 15-point plan to Iran starting with a month-long truce,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 25/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9nz>



as “stupid wars.”²⁵ Alternatively, he may seek to resolve the conflict through the maximal use of US firepower, a course that could have catastrophic consequences for Iran as a state and for the wider region. In addition, the continuation of the war could generate serious economic and political repercussions, potentially leading the Republicans to suffer major losses in the upcoming midterm elections. This could render Trump a “lame duck” during the final two years of his presidency and expose him to a series of investigations that Democrats may initiate on issues such as the Epstein case, alleged misuse of presidential office for family enrichment, and the decision to wage war on Iran without congressional authorization.

Trump thus appears to be searching for a way out and has declared victory on several occasions in preparation for such a move. If he fails to find a viable escape route, he may ultimately find himself face to face with one of the two catastrophic options outlined above.

²⁵ Jason Lange and Bo Erickson, “Exclusive: Trump’s approval hits new 36% low as fuel prices surge amid Iran war, Reuters/Ipsos poll finds”, *Reuters*, 24/3/2026, accessed on 26/3/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9B9JG>