



By: **Ian Bremmer**

Trump's Iran gamble - the easy way or the hard way



Although Iran is not in the Western Hemisphere, it may well be the next theater where US President Donald Trump tries to reshape reality with military force. But unlike his quick win in Venezuela, US intervention in Iran could easily spiral out of control.

Trump has made his position clear: Iran's rulers can do this the easy way or the hard way.

The easy way means accepting a deal tougher than the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement) that Trump walked away from during his first term.

Iran would have to surrender its stockpile of highly enriched uranium; agree to halt enrichment indefinitely; dismantle what remains of the nuclear program; accept limits on ballistic missiles, with full inspections; and end support for regional proxies like Hezbollah and the Houthis. The hard way means **military strikes** – big ones.

This isn't idle talk. Trump came within a hair's breadth of ordering attacks just weeks ago, after the Iranian regime killed thousands – possibly tens of thousands – of protesters in a brutal crackdown.

What stopped him wasn't second thoughts, but a lack of US military capacity to shield Israel and American bases in the region should Iran retaliate.

Since then, a **carrier group**, eight US Navy **destroyers**, dozens of F-15s and other strike aircraft, and a THAAD and Patriot battery (ground-to-air defense) have been deployed to the region.

The goal is to cover the entire Middle East theater with a defensive umbrella to counter the risk of mass casualties if Iran hits back.

A fundamental problem remains

Meanwhile, regional powers have been scrambling to avert a wider war, with Turkey, Qatar, Oman, and Egypt trying to broker talks.

Trump claims that diplomatic progress is being made, but a fundamental problem remains: his demands go well beyond what Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, will give.

The Islamic Republic may be willing to make concessions on its nuclear program to avoid strikes and ease the domestic economic crisis.

The maximum Tehran can offer doesn't meet the minimum Washington has been willing to accept

But it will not formally surrender the right to enrich uranium domestically, and Iranian officials have ruled out giving up their ballistic missiles.

Ultimately, the maximum Tehran can offer doesn't meet the minimum Washington has been willing to accept, and gunboat diplomacy alone won't change that.

So, either Trump will back down and take a smaller deal that he can spin as a victory, or we will see military action.

Given that he's already hit Iran twice without blowback, and that he walked away from the **JCPOA** because he thought it was inadequate, it seems unlikely that he would settle for a nuclear-only arrangement now.

Maximum pressure

True, he could probably sell such a deal if he wanted to. Forcing Iran to surrender its uranium would neutralize the immediate nuclear breakout threat.

Combined with Israel's degradation of Iran's missile program and regional proxies last year, that could allow Trump to declare that he had solved the nuclear problem that had stymied his predecessors.

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But with the military buildup accelerating, he is more likely testing whether maximum pressure can force Iran into major concessions while getting the pieces to strike into place in the likely event that it can't.

This scenario could involve not only strikes on nuclear or missile sites, but possibly a Venezuela-style decapitation: taking out Khamenei himself. After all, Trump's team has been emboldened by recent experience.

The successful mission in Venezuela is still fresh; the 2020 US assassination of Iran's top military commander, Qassem Suleimani, drew minimal retaliation against US targets, as did the joint strikes with Israel last year.

Iran is not Venezuela

The bet is that pragmatic conservatives within the Supreme National Security Council and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps would take control after the Supreme Leader's death and seek to ensure regime survival.

To that end, intelligence efforts have been underway to cultivate senior figures in the IRGC and Khamenei's circle – regime insiders who might cooperate with the decapitation strike and lead a successor government that the US could live with.

But Iran is not Venezuela. The regime has more capacity to hit back, deeper internal loyalty, and larger and more capable security forces.

Moreover, succession is far less likely to go smoothly. Khamenei is not just Iran's supreme leader; he is a spiritual figurehead for Shia Islam.

His death would shock the system in ways that might not produce the orderly transition the

Trump administration is counting on.

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Even if Iran's leaders wanted to avoid escalation, losing a figure of such stature would require a sizable retaliation, including strikes on US bases and ships in the Gulf.

In the event of significant American casualties, the situation could easily spiral.

And if hardliners seize control instead of pragmatists, we could also see massive retaliation against energy flows.

Oil prices have already ticked up despite ample global crude supply and tepid demand growth. If Trump strikes Khamenei, expect a bigger spike in the range of \$5-10 per barrel – or possibly more if the transition goes badly.

That would translate into inflation at home less than nine months before the midterm elections.

The great-power dimension

Then there's the great-power dimension. Unlike Venezuela, where Russia and China mostly grumbled as Trump installed a friendlier head of state, regime change in Iran crosses a line that both care deeply about. Iran supplies drones to Russia and oil to China.



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Taking down Khamenei would set a precedent that neither wants normalized: that the United States can topple leaders with whom they are aligned anywhere in the world.

Both will want to impose costs on Trump, if only to deter similar moves in their own spheres of influence.

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Perhaps that will push Trump toward a limited deal. But the president has shown he firmly believes that audacity pays. Will that be true in Iran?

The answer matters well beyond the Middle East. If Trump pulls this off, he will be more convinced than ever that raw American power can solve any problem and achieve any goal.

Each success raises the stakes for the next gamble. If it goes sideways – if Hezbollah and the Houthis coordinate attacks across the region; if hardliners take over and close the Strait of Hormuz; if oil hits \$90 per barrel and stays there; if Russia and China impose real costs – we will find out just how dangerous these bets really are.

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