



By: TA | AP Insight

Will the US deploy troops in Iran to seize uranium?



President Donald Trump is facing perhaps the most daunting question of the war with Iran, one that could define his time in office: Will he put U.S. troops on the ground in Iran to secure some **970 pounds of enriched uranium** that Tehran could potentially use to build nuclear weapons?

Trump has offered **shifting reasons** for launching the war, but he has been consistent in articulating that a primary objective in joining Israel in the military action is ensuring that Iran will “**never have a nuclear weapon.**”

The president has been more circumspect about how far he's willing to go to follow through on his pledge to destroy Iran's weapons program once and for all, including seizing or destroying the near-bomb-grade nuclear material that Iran possesses.

Much of it is believed to be buried under the rubble of a mountain facility pummeled in **U.S. bombings** Trump ordered last June that he had claimed “obliterated” Tehran's nuclear program.

It's a risky, complicated project that many nuclear experts say cannot be done without a sizable deployment of U.S. troops into Iran, a dangerous and politically fraught operation for the Republican president, who has vowed **not to entangle the U.S.** in the sort of extended and bloody Middle East conflicts that still loom large on America's psyche.

At the same time, lawmakers and experts remain concerned that if Iran hard-liners emerge from the fighting, they'll be more motivated than ever to build nuclear weapons as they look to deter the U.S. and Israel from future military action, a dynamic that makes taking control of Iran's enriched uranium even more critical.

That stockpile could allow Iran to build as many as **10 nuclear bombs**, should it decide to weaponize its program.

Boots on the ground

Some lawmakers, like Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., say they remain deeply fearful that the president has put the nation on a path that will require putting troops inside Iran for what he called Trump's confused and chaotic objectives.

“Some of the objectives that he continues to espouse simply cannot be achieved without a physical presence there -- securing the uranium cannot be done without a physical presence,” said Blumenthal, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Meanwhile, Republican allies of Trump stress that there are plans in place to deal with the enriched uranium.

No one has given me a briefing on how you would do it without boots on the ground - Rick Scott

Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman James Risch, R-Idaho, on Wednesday cited “a number of plans that have been put on the table.” He declined to elaborate.

Others acknowledged the complications of deploying troops into Iran.

“No one has given me a briefing on how you would do it without boots on the ground,” said Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. “It doesn't mean you can't. But no one's ever briefed me about it.”

Scott added it's not tenable to allow the stockpile to remain: “I think it would be helpful to get rid of it.”

Trump and advisers are nontransparent about deliberations over uranium

Nearly three weeks into a conflict that's left hundreds of people dead, tested **long-standing alliances** and brought pain to the global economy, Trump and his top advisers have

been nontransparent about their deliberations over Iran's uranium stockpile.

"I'm not going to talk about that," Trump said last week when asked about the enriched uranium. "But we have hit them harder than virtually any country in history has been hit, and we're not finished yet."

They don't have nuclear potential - Donald Trump

Later that day, during an appearance in Kentucky, Trump appeared to claim the strikes had already neutralized the threat. "They don't have nuclear potential," he said.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told reporters earlier this week that the administration sees no point in telegraphing "what we're willing to do or how far we're willing to go" while asserting "we have options, for sure."

Experts say it's doable but won't be easy

Richard Goldberg, who served as director for countering Iranian weapons of mass destruction for the National Security Council during Trump's first term, said that seizing or destroying the enriched uranium is certainly doable, if the president decides to go that route.

The U.S. and Israeli forces have been making strides toward creating the conditions — namely, establishing total air superiority — that would allow for special operations forces operators, who are trained in blowing up centrifuges and dealing with nuclear material, to conduct such an operation.

To be certain, a troops-on-the-ground effort is expected to be far more complicated than other recent high-profile, lightning-strike insertion operations, such as the January capture of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro or the May 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden, Goldberg

said.

And the likely need to remove rubble to get to the canisters of enriched uranium adds another layer of complexity, because it would require heavy construction equipment.

"But if you actually own the airspace and you can have close air support and drones and everything else up in the sky for pretty wide perimeter, presumably you could do a lot," said Goldberg, who is now a senior adviser at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a hawkish Washington think tank.



The U.S. attacks on Iran had obliterated Iran's nuclear enrichment program and buried underground facilities - Tulsi Gabbard

International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Grossi told reporters in Washington this week that the assumption is much of the enriched uranium remains in the trio of Iranian nuclear sites bombarded last year by the U.S.

"The impression we have ... is that it hasn't been moved," said Grossi, adding that a bulk of the material is beneath the rubble at Iran's Isfahan facility while lesser amounts are at the Natanz and Fordow facilities that were destroyed in last year's American strikes.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said in a Sunday appearance on CBS' "Face the Nation" that Iran offered to dilute the enriched uranium stockpile during his talks with Trump's negotiators, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, that failed to produce a deal shortly before the U.S. and Israel began the bombardment.

Testifying before a Senate committee on Wednesday, Director of National Intelligence **Tulsi Gabbard** in her prepared remarks said that the U.S. attacks on Iran had “obliterated” Iran’s nuclear enrichment program and buried underground facilities.

Gabbard said the U.S. has been monitoring whether Iran’s leaders will try to restart its nuclear program but said that they have not tried to rebuild their nuclear enrichment capability.

She added that the clerical authority overseeing Iranian government has been degraded in Israel’s strikes on its leadership but remains intact.

Brandan Buck, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Cato Institute, said that an effort to extract or dilute the enriched material would likely take more than 1,000 troops at each Iranian site and would take time to complete.

On the other hand, not acting to secure the enriched uranium also comes with risk. Should Iran’s hard-liners remain in power, and with enriched material, they will now have greater motivation to build a nuclear weapon.

“Trump has put himself between a rock and a hard place,” Buck said. “Throughout this, he has had maximalist aims, but he’s wanted to maintain minimal effort in order to keep the costs low.”