

Iran is nervous about the Trump administration, but also defiant

written by David M. Weinberg | 05.04.2025

The Trump administration is deploying an unprecedented amount of US military might to bases in the Middle East, near Iran and Yemen. The military buildup is backed by “maximum sanctions” against Iran and an explicit US deadline of two months for a “deal” to end Iran’s nuclear bomb and ballistic missile programs.

Without a deal, President Donald Trump has said, “there will be bombing.” US National Security Advisor Mike Walz has specified that Iran must “hand over and give up” all elements of its nuclear program, including missiles, weaponization, and uranium enrichment.

Iran is clearly nervous, which is a good thing, but also defiant, which was to be expected.

“Supreme Leader” Ayatollah Khamenei said last month that Tehran would not be bullied into talks with the US by “excessive demands and threats,” and he rejected direct negotiations. He threatened a “harsh blow” if the US attacks Iran.

The commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard air force this week made the Iranian threat more explicit: “The US has 10 bases and 50,000 troops in the region... If you live in a glass house, you shouldn’t throw stones,” he warned. And Khamenei’s adviser and former parliament speaker Ali Larijani emphasized that if the US bombs Iran’s nuclear facilities, Iranian “public opinion” will pressure the government to “change its policy” and pursue nuclear weapons.

But of course, Iran is rapidly approaching full nuclear military status already, with uranium enrichment and bomb-assembly facilities buried in underground bunkers – irrespective of Trump’s threats.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran has enriched uranium to almost-bomb-ready levels (60% and 84%, which are very close to the 90% level necessary for a nuclear weapon), with its stock of refined uranium hexafluoride growing by 92.5 kilograms in the past quarter alone to 274.8 kilograms. By IAEA

standards, this is sufficient for an estimated six nuclear weapons, with the final sprint achievable within months.

NO COUNTRY in the world has enriched uranium to 60%, as Iran has, without building nuclear weapons - so Tehran's intentions are clear. Getting the Islamic Republic to abandon this path (as well as its massive ballistic missile array) will be difficult if not impossible. I am doubtful that even the emerging credible threat of US (and Israeli) military action will do the trick.

Ultimately, Washington will have to act on its threat, and this will have to be soon.

To this end, the US has deployed fighter squadrons, stealth bombers, munitions, and Patriot and THAAD air defense batteries to the region along with two aircraft carrier strike groups. US military cargo flights into the region rose by 50% last month, with at least 140 heavy transport aircraft landing in Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan.

An A-10 ground-attack squadron was deployed to Jordan, stealth F-35s were sent to Saudi Arabia, and at least six B-2 stealth bombers have been stationed on the Indian Ocean island base of Diego Garcia - which is roughly a third of the US Air Force's B-2 fleet.

(Diego Garcia previously was used as a launch point for bombing missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The island lies about 4,000 kilometers from Iran and Yemen - close enough to support a large-scale strike on either, while remaining beyond the reach of their drones and ballistic missiles.)

And US Central Command chief Gen. Michael Kurilla was in Israel this week once again for meetings with senior Israeli military officials.

THERE IS more to be done. Richard Goldberg of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington has published a manifesto for "maximum pressure" on Iran that goes far beyond "maximum sanctions." This includes an end to all sorts of waivers and licenses that facilitate Iranian world trade, rigorous sanctions enforcement (mainly targeting Iran's oil trade with China), multilateral sanctions on third-party countries (including European countries) that facilitate Iranian banking and Iranian-backed radical Islamist NGOs, and more.

Barak Seener of the Henry Jackson Society in the UK argues for active

“destabilization” of the Iranian regime. This includes cyberattacks on Iran’s critical infrastructure, as well as targeting Iran’s oil infrastructure including refining and processing facilities, as well as domestic distribution pipelines and terminals. He also advocates the targeting of IRGC bases and personnel on Iranian or foreign soil.

Gregg Roman of the Middle East Forum has published a comprehensive strategy for democratic transition in Iran, which needs to be put in place even before a strike on the belligerent country. This involves an aggressive information campaign, amplifying internal pressures backing opposition ethnic groups, leveraging regional cooperation networks, dismantling Iran’s regional proxy network (something that Israel already is tackling), and transition planning with post-regime scenarios.

These efforts should include exposing the regime’s repression and human rights abuses and carrying out political warfare against the regime: Constant criticism of its economic failings and brutality, support for Iran’s neighbors if it threatens them, and aid (overt and covert) for efforts by Iranians to protest a regime most of them clearly loathe.

IN A RECENT, thoughtful Foreign Affairs essay, Elliott Abrams reminds us of the overall purpose of all this over Trump’s four-year second presidency: To create a Middle East where Washington’s friends are far stronger and its enemies far weaker than ever before. Israel’s recent successful actions against Hamas and Hezbollah (Iran’s proxies) and its crushing blows on Iran’s air defenses create an opportunity for Washington in this regard.

“Keeping Iran and allies off balance”

“The United States now has a chance to keep Iran and its allies off balance,” Abrams wrote. “Because the only true solution to the problem of the Islamic Republic is its demise, the United States and allies should mount a pressure campaign on behalf of the Iranian people – who wish for the regime’s end more fervently than any foreigner.”

Even if Trump decides to negotiate a bit with Iran before moving to military action, Abrams asserts that it is possible to engage in practical negotiations with an enemy state without losing the sharp edge of ideological combat.

Recall US president Ronald Reagan's relations with the Soviet Union. "An American president can talk to an authoritarian adversary without sacrificing moral clarity and without dropping support for people yearning to be free of a repressive regime and often demonstrating in the streets, despite the risks," Abrams said.

"The United States should always view such negotiations as a tactic in the long struggle for a peaceful Middle East - a goal that cannot be reached until the Islamic Republic is replaced by a government that is legitimate in the eyes of the Iranian people and that abandons its terrorist proxies, its hatred of the United States and of Israel, and its desire to dominate other countries in the region. Until that day, the military presence of the United States must not diminish..."

To which I add that Trump's plans for "winning" in the global struggle against China and his hopes for a reset in relations with Russia depend to a great extent on proving his mettle in a confrontation with Iran.

If the president's bluster against Tehran ends up with another Obama-style soft deal that just kicks the Iranian nuclear can down the road, then Trump's presidency is finished, at least in international affairs. He will never be the "transformational" president with "historic" achievements that he so explicitly wants to be.

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