

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

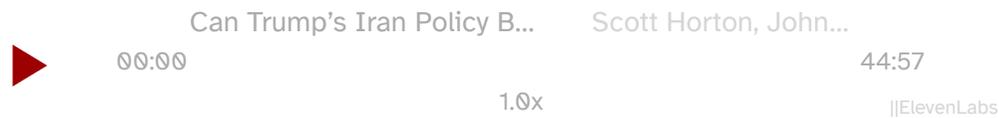
Can Trump's Iran Policy Be Saved?

For decades, the U.S. and Iran have been heading for war. It may soon be too late to stop it.

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(CARLOS BARRIA/POOL/AFP via Getty Images)



On June 22, 2025, President Donald Trump unleashed the American military on Iran. Operation Midnight Hammer was not just a demonstration of how far the U.S. military can reach and how hard it can hit. It was also an unprecedented and unfortunately logical culmination of decades of misguided, counterproductive U.S.–Iran policy. The fate of the region, and potentially the world, now revolves around whether the Trump administration remains chained by or can free itself from that failed policy’s myriad constraints.

The June strikes targeted Iranian nuclear energy infrastructure with the declared intent of eliminating Iran’s capability to develop nuclear weapons. A U.S. submarine launched at least 24 Tomahawk land attack cruise missiles at the nuclear research and production center in Isfahan. Meanwhile, seven B-2 bombers dropped a total of 14 bunker-buster



bombs on the Fordow and Natanz nuclear sites. Some 125 aircraft participated in the operation, including refueling tankers and fighter escorts.

The Tomahawk carries a 1,000-pound conventional warhead, but the B-2s' bunker buster bombs each weigh 30,000 pounds. Using the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrators (or MOPs), Washington hoped they could destroy uranium enrichment facilities secured deep underground. It was the kind of conventional knockout punch that Israel, which launched a surprise decapitation strike against Iranian nuclear scientists and top military leadership on June 13, is not militarily capable of carrying out on their own.

No U.S. personnel were reported killed or wounded. But, at the strategic and grand strategic/geopolitical levels, the direct U.S. bombing of Iran could very well have set the stage for catastrophic, unintended consequences.

Despite Trump's official line that the nuclear sites were "completely and totally obliterated," early reports suggested the sites were damaged but not destroyed.



In May, Iran was in the middle of negotiations with the United States over their IAEA-Safeguarded nuclear energy program—which had long doubled as a so-called latent or threshold nuclear deterrent. Similar to Germany, Japan, and Brazil, Iran had proven that they had mastered the uranium fuel cycle and therefore had the potential capability to make nuclear weapons, without actually making one. Some may call this a loophole in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but that treaty does guarantee their right to nuclear technology, including enrichment, for peaceful purposes. More talks were on the schedule when the bombing began.

In a sense, Iran has chosen a third option compared to Iraq and Libya, which surrendered all of their unconventional weapons capability and were each subsequently attacked by the U.S., and North Korea, which decided to abandon the NPT and go ahead and build a nuclear arsenal in response to multiple threats from the George W. Bush administration, and which has been able to maintain their independence since. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei decided he would build a civilian program, and its latent deterrent capability, under international supervision, and within the rules of the NPT.

Since the 1990s, American presidents have sworn they would do anything, including start a war, to prevent Iran from breaking out toward



a nuclear weapon, while it has been the Ayatollah's unstated but implicit policy to threaten that if the U.S. started a war against Iran, then they would make one.

It was a long-term standoff, and it could have held.

The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's position had been that any active nuclear program in Iran was the equivalent of a weapons program, and especially that no domestic uranium enrichment could be allowed at any level, since, he believed, it would only be a matter of time before they used that knowledge and experience to go ahead and make an atom bomb.

Now that Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump have called Khamenei's bluff, we will find out whether the president has helped fulfill his ally's prophecy of a full-scale U.S.–Iran war.

Our political establishment would also do well to recognize the deep, turbulent history of U.S. relations with Iran. This includes the U.S.-backed 1953 coup in Tehran, American backing for the Shah's repressive government, the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979, the Iraq–Iran War, the post–Cold War unipolar moment, and the onset of the Global War on Terror in 2001.



Many decisions made in these pivotal moments drove a U.S. policy toward Iran that plunged our nation into one disaster after another. The Trump administration bears tremendous responsibility. If it has any hope of meeting this historical moment and righting the ship of state, this history must be both taken into account and overcome.

The Axis of Evil

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, George W. Bush said that together Pyongyang, Baghdad, and Tehran “constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” This was less than five months after the Al Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was a crucial moment in the relationship between the U.S. and Iran. Tehran had been consistently represented as a malefactor state to the American people for more than 20 years, but it was then being situated as an official enemy within the context of the new Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).

The September 11 attacks had immediately been likened to the Imperial Japanese surprise attack on the U.S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941. That attack is viewed as what ultimately provoked the United States into entering the Second World War, a war in which it joined the “allied” nations of the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and



China against the “axis” powers of Germany, Italy and Japan. The American historian Victor Davis Hanson called the Second World War the first global conflict and argued that it comprised several distinct wars, including the air war over Japan, the ground war in Europe, and the logistics effort in, of all places, Iran, shipping military supplies to the Soviet Union.

The natural juxtaposition of the September 11 attack to Pearl Harbor made it easy for the Bush administration to juxtapose the terror war with the Second World War. This was a propaganda windfall, since the popular narrative of the Second World War has become the founding myth of the American empire, with Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower effectively replacing Washington, Jefferson, and Hamilton as the architects of our modern nation. Bush and his administration sold the American people on *indefinitely* fighting distinct wars all over the world.

Of course, none of the Axis of Evil nations had anything to do with the September 11 attacks. None were a threat to the United States of America. Moreover, none of them even represented a serious threat to American interests.

Meanwhile, within the so-called axis, Afghanistan was not included, even though its Taliban-run government had been conflated with Al Qaeda



and, in November 2001, was overthrown by American and proxy forces. This is not to mention the fact that the U.S. military was currently occupying the country, mostly hunting Afghans after failing to prevent Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda's escape in December. The cynicism was clear. The war against the Taliban regime was mainly a psyop against the American people so they wouldn't get the idea that all their government should do was focus on those actually responsible for murdering almost 3,000 people in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Bush's team had ambitious plans to remake the Middle East.

Iraq War II

In the aftermath of Desert Storm in 1991, during which the U.S. military crushed Iraq but allowed Saddam Hussein to remain in power, many in Washington D.C. had become convinced that America needed to finish the job. George W. Bush and his team bought into that policy fervently.

Iran had the misfortune to be situated right between Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, it took its inclusion in the Axis of Evil seriously. After the U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003, placing U.S. forces to the west and east of Iran, the Islamic Republic attempted to normalize relations with Washington.



Iran had been largely cooperative in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al Qaeda there and generally after the war began, including after their inclusion by Bush in the “Axis of Evil.” In spring 2003, Tehran approached the U.S. with a so-called “golden offer” to negotiate on just about everything. Iran was willing to discuss and alleviate any concerns about its then-nascent civilian nuclear program as well as its support for regional proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. It was willing effectively to ignore Israel while assisting Washington in both its fight with the Taliban and its efforts to pacify Iraq.

The Bush administration rejected their proposal and continued its confrontational policy. In fact, the administration had already committed itself to a plan, revealed by the former Army General Wesley Clark, to “take out seven countries in five years.” The nations on D.C.’s hit list were Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran. The sideshow in Afghanistan did not make the list, nor did the alleged evil triumvir North Korea.

Pyongyang’s inclusion in the Axis of Evil made the global war on terrorism seem truly global. But the real struggle DC was engaged in, under the cover of confronting terrorism, was regional. Iran was no threat to the American people, nor to the American global order. As late as 1998, Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney was advocating against President



Bill Clinton's sanctions and for normalization. But it was perceived as a threat to Israeli hegemony in the Middle East, so on the list it went. Clark confirmed this in a debate with the author (Horton) last year.

The neoconservatives were former Trotskyites and Cold War Democrats who moved right after Vietnam in reaction to the New Left's opposition to Vietnam and the Six-Day War, and its embrace of the Civil Rights movement. After Vietnam, they formed an alliance with the military-industrial complex. They would provide fancy intellectual apologiae for big defense spending and a militarist foreign policy. The weapons manufacturers and military and intelligence bureaucracies would fund and legitimize their foundations and think tanks. War itself was always good for the weapons companies. War against the seven countries on the kill list would be, so the neocons believed, good for Israel.

The influential neoconservative strategists David Wurmser and Richard Perle were convinced that regime change in favor of the Iraqi Shi'ite supermajority, under the control of their chosen leaders, would be a "nightmare for Iran" and help to sever the links between Tehran and their allies in Damascus and southern Lebanon; this would allow Israel to abandon the Oslo peace process and continue their project of colonizing what was left of Palestine. Shi'ite Iraq would even reopen the old oil pipeline to Haifa. They also believed that the U.S. and Israel should then



“expedite the chaotic collapse” of Syria regardless, and, despite the threat of the spread of bin Laden–type terrorism, since, Wurmser insisted, “the West and its local friends must engage fundamentalism with better associates than Ba’athists.”

To be sure, Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld were not neoconservatives. Each of these men had his own reasons for advocating war with Iraq. But it was the neoconservatives who took the initiative in arranging the conflict. In 1917, only a few thousand Bolsheviks had seized control of the entire Russian Empire. Less than a century later, it only took approximately 100 neoconservatives to dominate the foreign policy of the most powerful nation that has ever existed. They positioned themselves in key positions at newspapers, magazines, think tanks, and undersecretary positions throughout the national security bureaucracy.

The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* interviewed the *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman in the wake of the invasion of Iraq. Friedman was not a neoconservative, but he supported the war and was knowledgeable of their movement. Reported *Haaretz*:

Is the Iraq war the great neoconservative war? It’s the war the neoconservatives wanted, Friedman says. It’s the war the



neoconservatives marketed. Those people had an idea to sell when September 11 came, and they sold it. Oh boy, did they sell it. So this is not a war that the masses demanded. This is a war of an elite. Friedman laughs: I could give you the names of 25 people (all of whom are at this moment within a five-block radius of this office) who, if you had exiled them to a desert island a year and a half ago, the Iraq war would not have happened.

According to the journalists Julian Borger, Robert Dreyfuss and James Bamford, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon even had his office generate propaganda about Iraqi weapons to funnel into the intelligence stream to help lie the U.S. into the war. Karen Kwiatkowski, an Air Force lieutenant colonel and whistleblower, wrote in these pages of Israeli generals marching around the Pentagon, including Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith's office, as if they owned the place during the leadup to war. Feith and his men dug through the CIA's trash and retailed the wholesale lies of the Iraqi exiles about Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction and alliance with Al Qaeda.

The invasion was the opening move in the neoconservatives' grand, geopolitical chess game. But as could be anticipated with any government-run five-year plan, it quickly blew up in its architects' faces.



The first country on the list, Iraq, was easy to invade and conquer. Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated Ba'athist government collapsed in April 2003, less than a month after U.S. tanks rolled into Iraq. U.S. Marines toppled a statue of Saddam in Firdos Square on April 9 (while making it look like local Iraqis did it with close-up camera angles of re-imported exiles on scene), an iconic moment that symbolized colossal American military power and cunning neoconservative grand strategy. In an April 10 *New York Times* opinion column entitled "Jubilant V-I Day," the neoconervatives' ally William Safire wrote:

Like newly freed Parisians tossing flowers at Allied tanks; like newly freed Germans tearing down the Berlin Wall; like newly freed Russians pulling down the statue of the hated secret police chief in Dzerzhinsky Square, the newly freed Iraqis toppled the figure of their tyrant and ground their shoes into the face of Saddam Hussein. All these pictures flow together in the farrago of freedom's victories over despotism in the past two generations.

A "farrago" is a mess, and this is exactly what Iraq (and the neoconservatives' plans) soon became. The United States sparked a civil war between the Shi'ite supermajority and the formerly dominant Sunnis that unleashed chaos, torture, death squads, the rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq



(AQI), and brutal ethnic cleansing, leaving more than a million people dead.

Washington helped the Shi'ites crush the Sunni insurgency, but also fought pointless mini-wars in Baghdad's Sadr City district and in the southern city of Najaf in 2004 and 2007–2008 against one of the most powerful Shi'ite militias they were fighting the larger war for: the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. They blamed his resistance on Iran, though he was not so close to Tehran as the factions that the U.S. actually did favor, the Da'wa Party and Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), later renamed the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (ISCI) after Bush won their revolution for them. Unlike Sadr, they had been living in Iran for over 20 years—since the Iran–Iraq War broke out—and they sided with the ayatollah. Every Iraqi prime minister since the purple-fingered elections of 2005 has been from Da'wa or ISCI, with only one exception. The new Iraqi army was staffed mostly from ISCI's Badr Brigade death squad and other Shi'ite militias. Al-Sadr has remained a powerful kingmaker behind the scenes. These forces were hostile to Israel and ultimately determined to kick the Americans out as well.

As the war in Iraq became one of the greatest geopolitical blunders in U.S. history, the Bush administration and its neoconservatives desperately looked for someone to blame other than themselves. One scapegoat they



seized on was Tehran. In 2007, the neocons did everything they could to expand the war to Iran. They almost succeeded.

First, they claimed Iran was providing the Mahdi Army with deadly “explosively formed penetrators” (EFPs), which were improved, shaped, copper-cored improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that could cut through American armor. This was a lie. The EFPs were made by Iraqis in Iraq with parts bought on the open market. To this day Americans are regularly told that “Iran killed 600 Americans in Iraq” based on this lie. They also constantly claimed that Iran was developing nuclear weapons and that it was the world’s greatest state sponsor of terrorism.

Wurmser, then serving as Cheney’s deputy assistant for national security affairs, and apparently recognizing the failure of his policy to deliver its intended results, revealed in spring 2007 that his boss was considering doing an “end run” around the president by having the Israelis attack Iran. The idea was to provoke a counter-attack that would force Bush’s hand. The Pentagon had warned Bush against expanding the war that January. Admiral William Fallon, then-commander of Central Command, let his opposition be publicly known as well. The beloved seven-nation kill list notwithstanding, the military was not interested in attacking Iran while they still had some 100,000 troops in Iraq, embedded with and surrounded by Shi’ite soldiers far closer to Iran than to the United States.



The leaders of the Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army had all promised to “do their duty” against U.S. forces were the war to expand to the east.

Bush ultimately resisted pressure from Israel’s then–Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the hawks in the vice president’s office to bomb Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets within Iran, and the CIA and National Intelligence Council poured cold water over the false claims of their nuclear weapons production with their National Intelligence Estimate that November.

Still, Bush’s government wasted at least \$3 trillion on the second Iraq war, and got approximately 4,500 U.S. troops killed and tens of thousands horrifically maimed. The PTSD and moral injuries suffered by our soldiers have been so atrocious that many thousands more combat veterans of the Iraq war have committed suicide than were killed in combat. This trend has remained consistent amidst the entire war on terrorism.

The Bush team had dreamt of dozens of military bases throughout Iraq with which to project American power and threaten Iran. They had to settle for a few poorly defended outposts, mostly up in Iraqi Kurdistan, that are mostly useful only as potential tripwires for further conflict. Wurmser and Perle failed to deliver on their promised oil pipeline to



Haifa. The Israelis were concerned. The Saudis were horrified. If the American people knew what their leaders had just done, they may have begun to suspect their government was in the hands of imbeciles at best and incompetent foreign agents at worst.

The Redirection

Meanwhile, the Bush team found another way to make up for their blunder in Iraq. The “Redirection” back toward the interests of the Sunni kings of the Gulf and the anti-Shi’ite Israelis, which in practice simply meant turning around and backing radical Sunni groups throughout the Middle East. This entailed supporting bin Ladenite terrorists in Lebanon, Syria and Iran, just as Carter, Reagan, and Clinton had supported them in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Chechnya before. Only now, in a post-September 11 world, Washington was actively bolstering jihadi terrorists sworn loyal to the butchers of New York City.

In a March 2007 report for the *New Yorker*, the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh wrote:

To undermine Iran, which is predominantly Shi’ite, the Bush Administration has decided, in effect, to reconfigure its priorities in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the Administration



has cooperated with Saudi Arabia's government, which is Sunni, in clandestine operations that are intended to weaken Hezbollah, the Shi'ite organization that is backed by Iran. The U.S. has also taken part in clandestine operations aimed at Iran and its ally Syria. A by-product of these activities has been the bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to al Qaeda.

One contradictory aspect of the new strategy is that, in Iraq, most of the insurgent violence directed at the American military has come from Sunni forces, and not from Shi'ites. But, from the Administration's perspective, the most profound—and unintended—strategic consequence of the Iraq war is the empowerment of Iran....

The key players behind the redirection are Vice-President Dick Cheney, the deputy national-security adviser Elliott Abrams, the departing Ambassador to Iraq (and nominee for United Nations Ambassador), Zalmay Khalilzad, and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi national-security adviser....

The new strategy “is a major shift in American policy—it’s a sea change,” a U.S. government consultant with close ties to Israel



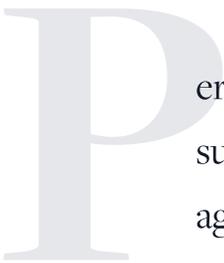
said. The Sunni states “were petrified of a Shi’ite resurgence, and there was growing resentment with our gambling on the moderate Shi’ites in Iraq,” he said. “We cannot reverse the Shi’ite gain in Iraq, but we can contain it.

The Redirection included unleashing terrorist groups like Jundallah in Iran, killing that country’s military leaders and civilians alike. When President Barack Obama took office in 2009, he inherited Bush’s “Redirection” policy and managed to make it even worse.

The JCPOA and Genocide, Etc.

Perhaps President Barack Obama’s greatest achievement was the successful “Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action” (JCPOA) nuclear agreement with Iran. Ever since being placed in the Axis of Evil by President Bush, Iran had known the full nation-destroying wrath of the empire could come down on it at any time. Its strategy had been to open wide the books on its civilian nuclear energy program and repeatedly remind the global community that it was a signatory of the NPT.

None of that was good enough for the neoconservatives and the Israelis, especially Prime Minister Netanyahu, then newly returning to office.



With the JCPOA, Obama made it clear to the entire world that Iran's civilian nuclear program was locked down. The deal included the most comprehensive and intrusive inspections regime ever implemented by the IAEA. As part of the agreement, Tehran poured concrete into its Arak heavy water reactor, disabling it and precluding any potential production of weapons-grade plutonium waste, although Iran lacked the necessary reprocessing facilities required to create weapons fuel from that waste in any case. The Iranians also rolled back their number of operating centrifuges, while agreeing to strict limits on uranium enrichment (3.67 percent for civilian energy purposes), as well as on how much low-enriched uranium they could stockpile. They agreed to expand the IAEA's access to their uranium mines and centrifuge facilities, and even signed up for processes that allowed the IAEA to conduct inspections at military bases.

Thus, Iran could no longer be even suspected of maintaining a secret, illegal, parallel, nuclear weapons program as the War Party had endlessly claimed. Iran, in return, received pallets of its own money—which was seized by the Treasury Department back in 1979, mid-weapons purchase, in response to the revolution—along with limited sanctions relief. The deal did succeed in squelching the propaganda and taking war with Iran off the table, for a few years anyway.



In 2011, Obama launched an aggressive regime-change war against Libya on behalf of a bunch of terrorists from Ansar al-Sharia and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), who had just gotten home from Iraq, checking it off the list of seven—even though Gaddafi had come in from the cold, had given up any nuclear equipment he had bought from Pakistan, and had been cooperating with the U.S. in the war against Al Qaeda. Obama also launched a clandestine operation against the Iranian-allied Ba’athist regime in Syria that put America directly on Al Qaeda’s side in yet another war, leading to the rise of the ISIS Caliphate in 2014 and Iraq War III to destroy it. Obama backed Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in waging a genocidal war against Yemen, deliberately inflicting famine and killing over 300,000 people. In that war, Obama again allied with Al Qaeda and ISIS against the Houthi tribe from the northern Sada Province, otherwise known as Ansar Allah, their Iranian-allied Shi’ite enemies (though their ties to Iran have virtually always been overstated).

Trump’s First Term

Trump managed to avoid war with Iran during his first term. To do so, he had to stand up to his own government. This was commendable.



Obama's Iran deal was imperfect. Some crucial aspects had sunset provisions attached. Trump could have let the Iranians know that he would be interested in expanding normalization if they would be willing to reopen talks about adjusting those sunsets. It would have at least been worth a try.

Unfortunately, he simply withdrew the United States from the JCPOA at Netanyahu's behest in 2018. Trump then launched a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran that included sanctions against Iranian officials, citizens, and corporations, along with various economic sectors including the entire oil industry. Iran remained in full compliance with the deal, to the letter, for a year following Trump's unilateral exit. In 2019, Tehran began slowly walking back its commitments, enriching uranium to just over 4 percent, which it is permitted to do, per the JCPOA's Articles 26 and 36, so long as one or more other parties have abrogated their responsibilities.

In June 2019, Iran shot down an American Navy drone they claimed had violated their airspace. Though some hawks in the administration wanted to strike at an Iranian naval base in response, Trump ultimately sided with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford and chose not to escalate.



Then, in January 2020, Trump authorized the assassination of Iran's General Qasem Soleimani just as he was arriving in Baghdad for a diplomatic mission concerning relations with Riyadh. (Incidentally, Beijing brokered the current détente between the long-time regional rivals three years later.) Soleimani was Iran's most senior military commander. Imagine how enraged Americans would be if a foreign nation assassinated the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Iranians were infuriated, as were the Iraqi Shi'ites who were allied with Iran and held deep respect for Soleimani.

That attack could have easily led to war with Iran, if not Iraq as well. Trump de-escalated tensions by actually allowing Iran to have the last word. They conducted symbolic strikes on two U.S. outposts in Iraq, hitting empty parts of the bases, killing no one, although approximately 100 U.S. military personnel suffered traumatic brain injuries. Trump thanked them for their service and called it even.

Then, during Trump's lame-duck period, in December 2020, Israel assassinated Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, Iran's top nuclear scientist, using the Marxist-Islamist Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK) terrorist cult as the cut out. As a result, Iran's parliament demanded that Tehran increase uranium enrichment to 20 percent, which could be used for medical purposes as well as negotiating leverage with the next American administration.



Elliot Abrams, the aforementioned arch-neocon and special envoy to Iran, declared that more sanctions would be piled on Iran with each coming week during the duration of the presidency. He even gloated that it would be practically impossible for the incoming Biden administration to return to the JCPOA. Tzachi Hanegbi, Israel's settlement minister at the time and a member of the nationalist Likud party, vowed the Israelis would go to war with Iran if Biden attempted to return to the JCPOA. Hanegbi is currently Netanyahu's national security advisor.

Autopilot

When President Joe Biden took office in 2021, there was hope that he would get the United States back into the JCPOA. After all, he had been vice president when Obama got the deal done, and many of the men who served under Obama were in the Biden administration. In a sense, the JCPOA was their deal.

To rejoin the JCPOA, however, would have taken a great deal of political capital; it required a fight and would have handed the GOP some useful talking points. In what would turn out to be a disaster, Biden preferred to essentially leave the Iran policy he had inherited from Trump on autopilot. In reality, this meant the U.S. and Iran began to climb the “escalation ladder.”



While team Biden dragged out renewed indirect JCPOA talks with Iran, Israel rolled out its version of maximum pressure by ramping up assassinations and escalating its covert sabotage campaign against nuclear facilities, both of which had been ongoing while Trump was still president. On May 22, 2022, the Israelis carried out a high-profile assassination of a senior IRGC officer, Col. Hassan Sayyad Khodaei. Israel was also attacking Iranian ships in international waters and drone-striking military facilities within Iran's borders, lobbying the United States to help them inflict "death by a thousand cuts" on the Iranian state and pushing out anti-Iranian propaganda via its agents within the United States.

In April 2021, only three months into Biden's term and just as administration officials were beginning indirect talks with Iran in Vienna, Israel launched a sabotage attack against Iran's Natanz nuclear facility (one of the sites Trump later bombed in June 2025). In response, Iran enriched uranium to the highest level it had ever gone: 60 percent. This was purely a negotiating tactic, the recent domestic propaganda blitz notwithstanding, and was understood as such during the last four years. Tehran, during the early Biden years, pledged never to exceed 60 percent enrichment and has kept its word.



Iran would need uranium enriched to at the very least 80 percent, but typically over 90 percent, U-235 to make a feasible nuclear weapon. And it only needs uranium enriched to 3–5 percent for its civilian nuclear program and approximately 20 percent for medical uses. Enrichment to 60 percent was sending a message: We know how to make weapons fuel; don't force us to make weapons fuel. This is essentially a latent nuclear threat and obviously something Iran could trade away in negotiations. But since there was no desire for a diplomatic solution in DC, this symbolic move may have only served to strengthen hardliners in Jerusalem and Washington.

The Biden administration was generally unwilling to push back against Israeli aggression and at times appeared to endorse it. After EU-brokered talks in Doha during June 2022, it began to look as though Biden's team wasn't just uninterested in getting back in the deal, but actively intended to sabotage it and thus was lying to the Iranians, although this should have been obvious to close observers by mid-2021. As Trita Parsi reported, the U.S. negotiating team refused, in May 2021, to offer Tehran a guarantee that sanctions would not be reimposed for the remainder of Biden's term even if Iran resumed full compliance. This policy of permanent aggression put Iran in a difficult position. It ultimately chose to continue indirect talks with the United States, brokered by the



remaining signatories of the deal, while relying on its latent nuclear threat to serve as some level of deterrence.

Trump Calls Khamenei's Bluff

I srael had partially checked Lebanon off the neoconservatives' kill list by decimating Hezbollah leadership, including assassinating its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in September 2024, as part of their war in the Gaza Strip. It checked Syria off the list in December 2024, as a coalition of terrorists ousted the former President Bashar al-Assad's government. The nation is now run by a former high-ranking Al Qaeda commander, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, now known as Ahmed Hussein al-Sharaa, who was inspired by September 11 and fought U.S. troops in Mosul and Ramadi in Iraq War II—a legacy of Bush and Obama's Redirection policy. Netanyahu took credit. Iran, then, was the last major Israeli adversary left on the board. Netanyahu remained obsessed with regime change.

On June 13, as the United States was involved in ongoing negotiations with Iran, Israel launched a surprise attack that attempted to decapitate the regime. Within 24 hours, Operation Rising Lion had brought immediate consequences. Iran, despite being taken by surprise and hit hard, began hitting back at military and other government targets in



Israel. Ten days into what became known as the “12-Day War,” Trump sent the B-2s.

What happens next is anyone’s guess, but the prospects for peace do not look good. Donald Trump has shown himself to have some good instincts when it comes to foreign policy, and he has paid a steep political price for challenging many of the sacred cows of the DC imperial consensus.

But now that he has accepted Netanyahu’s standard that any Iranian domestic nuclear enrichment capability is the equivalent of an active nuclear weapons program, forbidden and a target for renewed U.S. air attacks, the president has trapped himself and the rest of us into an ongoing cycle of escalation. The ayatollah and his men insist that they will continue to enrich, no matter what, and that they will not even reenter talks until the U.S. explicitly recognizes their right to do so. Recent reports say that much of Natanz is still intact, and of course they could always create new facilities at the end of deeper tunnels under taller mountains, and continue on as before.

Just as American non-interventionists have long worried, the IAEA has now been forced out of the country, breaking the chain of surveillance and making it more difficult if not impossible for them to verify the non-diversion of any uranium to military purposes upon their return. And



Iran, their bluff called, is now more likely to go ahead and break out toward a nuclear weapon than ever before. For now, at least, they claim that their position on that has not changed.

So the president is going to have to climb down on enrichment or likely turn the so-called 12-Day War into simply the first act in a spiral of escalation, potentially necessitating an attempted regime change in Tehran if he truly means to enforce his irrational demand.

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At the end of the day, Trump is the president of the United States of America. Regardless of whether one views our nation as an empire or simply the self-appointed stewards of a chaotic world order, the power is not held in Jerusalem, but in Washington.



It is time for Donald Trump to embrace his instincts for peace. It is time for Israel to allow him to try his hand at it. And if not, Jerusalem should be brushed aside and put in its proper place within the U.S.-led order.

Failure to secure a diplomatic solution to the current crisis will almost certainly result in a full fledged war and the destruction of Trump's presidency. The ball is in his court.

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