

On Iran, Trump Has Backed Himself — and Much of the World — Into a Corner

By **Stephen Zunes** , **Truthout**, May 5, 2026

The same kind of US hubris that led to the tragic wars in Vietnam and Iraq is manifesting itself with Iran today.

U.S. efforts to force an end to the stalemate in the Strait of Hormuz by attempting to escort a few U.S.-flagged ships through the Iranian closure will not only fail to relieve the worsening global fuel crisis and disruption of supply chains, it risks a resumption of full-scale war. The Trump administration has rejected Iran's suggestion for negotiating an end to the blockade followed by a resumption of talks on other outstanding issues, insisting that Iran first agree to eliminate its nuclear program.

In February 2019, I sat in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, along with a small delegation of American peace activists, with [Javad Zarif](#), the U.S.-educated foreign minister. He described how the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was a result of many months of intense direct negotiations, during which he met with then-Secretary of State John Kerry no less than 50 times, going over the agreement line by line.

Indeed, the talks took nearly two years, and involved five other nations (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China) as well as the support of the European Union and the United Nations, before finally reaching the agreement formally known as the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#). Those negotiations took the best efforts of scores of veteran diplomats, skilled mediators, and technical experts. The result was a deal which, in return for the lifting of sanctions, made it physically impossible for Iran to build even a single nuclear weapon and included a rigorous inspections regime to ensure Iran's compliance.

During his first administration, Donald Trump famously tossed that deal, insisting he could negotiate a better one. And now, instead of mobilizing the human and material resources to negotiate a political agreement with staying power to end the war, Trump is insisting that his son-in-law Jared Kushner, his real estate buddy Steve Witkoff, and his novice vice president JD Vance — none of whom have significant diplomatic experience or technical expertise regarding nuclear issues — could simply fly into Pakistan and, after no more than a few days, force Iran to capitulate.

Indeed, it was Kushner and Witkoff's [lack of understanding](#) of how nuclear enrichment and related issues work that prevented them from appreciating Iran's major concessions in talks early this year. Such ignorance likely contributed to Witkoff's [misleading assessments](#) regarding the progress in negotiations likely prompting Trump's decision to go to war.

Trump has continued claiming the JCPOA was a one-sided deal favoring Iran, when in fact it was just the opposite. Iran had agreed to strictly limit its nuclear program without any reciprocity from nuclear-armed states nearby — Israel, Pakistan, and India — even though all three have also been in violation of UN Security Council resolutions regarding their nuclear programs which, unlike Iran, have actually produced nuclear weapons. And none of the other nuclear powers, including the United States, were required to reduce their arsenals, either.

Despite this, [Trump abrogated the agreement](#), stating it did not go far enough to force Iran to stop supporting its regional allies, eliminate its missiles, and make internal political reforms. This has always been a pipe dream, however. It is hard to imagine any country not defeated in war making such concessions unilaterally. Indeed, Witkoff made a whole series of absurd demands, including that Iran unilaterally [give up its navy](#).

During the Cold War, in nuclear arms talks with the Soviet Union, despite the plethora of geopolitical issues dividing Washington and Moscow, even the extreme anti-communist Nixon and Reagan administrations recognized that nuclear arms needed to be addressed separately, both as a result of their singular importance and the fact that bringing up other issues would needlessly prolong the talks and likely make any agreement impossible.

In my 2019 meeting with Zarif in Tehran, he noted how he had to fight elements within the Iranian government who opposed the treaty. The JCPOA required Iran to destroy billions of dollars' worth of nuclear facilities and material in return for the lifting of debilitating sanctions. These political factions argued that the United States could renege on the agreement and reimpose sanctions at any time. Zarif and other political reformists expended enormous political capital by insisting that Washington could be trusted.

Trump proved Zarif and his fellow reformers wrong.

The reimposition of sanctions was not just in regard to Iran's own direct trade with the United States. The Trump administration insisted on imposing secondary sanctions on companies in any country that continued economic relations with Iran, forcing many to comply against their wishes. For example, the French conglomerate [TotalEnergies](#) decided to pull out of a major project in Iran rather than lose its larger investments in the United States.

In part as a reaction to the reimposition of sanctions and the seeming vindication of hardliners, Iranians elected conservative Ebrahim Raisi president in the [lowest turnout](#) since 1979, and the clerical military leadership hardened their own political positions against further diplomacy with the U.S. Up until that point, Iran had been strictly following the JCPOA limits on its nuclear program, despite the U.S. abrogation and the imposition of new sanctions. But with the international community no longer willing to honor its end of the deal with sanctions relief, Iran determined that it was no longer bound by restrictions to its nuclear program and began enriching uranium well beyond the 3.67 percent allowed by the agreement. It is believed that Iran is now up to 60 percent enrichment capability, far closer to the 90 percent necessary to build a nuclear weapon.

This further enrichment then led, with the support of European nations, to a resumption last year of the more comprehensive UN sanctions that had been lifted in 2015, worsening the economic situation still further. Those sanctions exacerbated the problems inherent in the Iranian state's crony capitalism, corruption, and economic mismanagement to further strangle the Iranian economy.

While Trump certainly deserves most of the blame, the failure of European countries to more forcefully challenge U.S. duplicity or even ensure desperately needed [humanitarian aid](#) makes it into Iran has further weakened Iranian officials seeking greater openness to the West and increased the power of political factions that insist on turning inward and imposing their will on a restless population.

In periods when the West appeared more willing to engage in serious diplomacy and economic relations, more political space has opened within Iran for both reformers within the system and pro-democracy activists seeking to change the system. By contrast, punitive sanctions, war, and the threat of war have helped elevate more reactionary clerical leadership as well as [enrich](#) elites and bolster the control of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has in many respects already turned Iran from simply a conservative theocracy into a brutal military dictatorship.

Trump does not appreciate the importance of real diplomacy, however. He is used to getting his way by making demands, issuing threats, and using whatever means of force are at his disposal, whether it be with business associates, regulators, women, or nations. He is under the false impression that Iran will blink first — that by denying Iran critically important revenue from its oil exports, it would effectively surrender. More likely, the Islamic Republic, which has dealt with major economic sanctions for much of its existence, is quite willing to let its economy suffer rather than submit in a war over its own existence. And the Iranian people are less likely to push for more democratic space in the domestic political sphere while they are struggling to survive day to day, and their nation is under constant threat of war.

While negotiating an interim agreement which would allow for at least a partial reopening the Strait of Hormuz and postponing nuclear talks until later seems like the logical course of action, Trump may see such a compromise as making him appear to be a loser since, despite all the human and financial costs of his war on Iran, it would at best be a return to the status quo ante. His [dramatic reaction](#) to comments by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz — traditionally one of the more hawkish European leaders in regard to Iran, publicly recognizing Washington's [lack of an exit strategy](#) — illustrates how he has backed himself into a corner, and much of the world with him.

If the domestic and international pressure for a reopening of the strait gets to be too much, Trump might borrow from Henry Kissinger's response to another negotiation impasse in December 1972: Despite progress in peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam, the U.S. launched a devastating 11-day bombing campaign over Christmas, dropping 20,000 tons of ordnance on North Vietnamese cities and killing more than 1,600 civilians. Four weeks later, a peace agreement was signed on essentially the same terms North Vietnam had offered before. The Nixon administration, however, contended that it was the bombing that led the North Vietnamese to agree to U.S. terms.

The Trump administration may use the escalating conflict over the strait as an excuse to launch a similar short-term intensive bombing campaign on Iran and, regardless of whether it leads to further Iranian concessions, essentially declare victory if the Strait of Hormuz reopens, even with tolls.

Whatever the outcome, the same kind of hubris out of Washington that led to the tragic wars in Vietnam and Iraq is manifesting itself with Iran today. This time, however, it is impacting the entire world.