

Guest Essay

Trump Could Take Us to War With Iran. But He Could Also Broker Peace.

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By John Ghazvinian, executive director of the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

In his first term as president, Donald Trump’s approach to Iran crossed almost every red line imaginable.

In May 2018, despite the desperate pleas of allies, he pulled the United States [out of](#) the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — the landmark Obama-era deal designed to limit the Islamic republic’s nuclear program. He [authorized the January 2020 assassination](#) of Iran’s top general, Qassim Suleimani, in a brazen act that came close to dragging the United States into yet another catastrophic conflict in the Middle East. And in the last two years of his term, he imposed [more than 1,500](#) sanctions on Iran as part of his “maximum pressure” campaign aimed at destroying the country’s economy and bringing the government to its knees. By any measure, it was the boldest and most outlandish Iran policy of any American president in decades.

Today, we have every indication that Mr. Trump’s second term will be less restrained than ever, on the domestic and international fronts. His pick for secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth, has called Iran an “[evil regime](#)” and urged Mr. Trump to bomb economic and [cultural sites](#) in the country. His presumptive nominee for secretary of state, Marco Rubio, has adopted a slightly mellower tone, but not by much. Mr. Rubio has [complained](#) that the Biden administration treated Iranian officials like “Belgian diplomats at the United Nations,” and recently [argued](#) that the “only” way to deal with Tehran was by “threatening the survival of the regime.”

Indeed, it is hard to imagine what more the United States could possibly throw at Iran next short of all-out war. Moreover, Mr. Trump’s good friend Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel seems intent on escalating the conflict with the Jewish state’s archrival. There is now genuine concern among some longtime Middle East observers that under Mr. Trump’s watch, events in the region could spiral out of control — and into war. As the former C.I.A. director and defense secretary Leon Panetta recently [put it](#), “I think he’s basically going to give Mr. Netanyahu a blank check.”

I’m not so sure that’s where we’re headed. What I do believe is that over the next four years, the toxic and seemingly unending psychodrama between the United States and Iran — now in its fifth decade — may very well see its final act. That could mean war, but there is no inevitable reason it has to. For Mr. Trump, who sees himself as the ultimate deal maker and has a fondness for the theatrical and unpredictable, it could just as easily take the form of a historic reconciliation. Mr. Trump could, under the right circumstances, be the American president who finally brings an end to the standoff between the United States and Iran that has destabilized the Middle East and served as a constant thorn in the side of American presidents since 1979.

The first Trump administration pursued a policy of economic warfare against Iran, in the belief that the Islamic republic was a house of cards ready to collapse under the weight of its own unpopularity. It didn't. If Mr. Trump and his advisers choose to continue this approach in his second term, there is a limit to how far they can go. There is, for a start, not much left in Iran to sanction: The country's banks, shipping fleets, oil industry, military and so much else have already been subjected to crushing U.S. and international sanctions. And still Iran's leaders have found ways to survive. The idea that ever more intense economic pressure will finally break this regime has proved wrong again and again.

This leaves the incoming Trump administration with three choices: ignore Iran, go to war with it, or try diplomacy.

Ignoring Iran has never worked. Tehran's revolutionary, anti-American leaders have a nasty habit of popping up and making their presence felt at the most inconvenient moments for American presidents, often wreaking havoc in the process. Most famously, in 1979, the eruption of the Iranian revolution pulled Jimmy Carter's attention away from Camp David peace talks between Israel and Egypt; the ensuing hostage crisis ultimately helped cost Mr. Carter his re-election. In the years after 2003, Iran-backed militias turned George W. Bush's victory party in Iraq into a nightmare for U.S. troops. More recently, in 2021, Mr. Biden tried to sideline Tehran after his initial attempts at reviving nuclear talks failed, only to be surprised by a China-brokered Saudi-Iran [reconciliation](#) that significantly weakened American standing in the Middle East.

The silent treatment is even less likely to work now, with Mr. Netanyahu clearly bent on reshaping the Middle East in a way that fundamentally weakens — or even ends — the Islamic republic. But he might find Mr. Trump to be a reluctant partner in any direct conflict with Tehran. Make no mistake: Mr. Trump and his picks for his Middle East advisers are almost certain to offer full-throated support to Israel in its fight with Hamas and Hezbollah. Joining in a fight against Iran may be a bridge too far. Mr. Trump is an isolationist to his core and has staked a lot of his reputation on ending the wars in the Middle East. It is hard to imagine him getting so drawn in that he agrees to put American boots on the ground.

That leaves diplomacy — the best option for Mr. Trump. His most tempting course of action would be to find some way to wind down Israel's war with Hamas, take credit for it, and then pivot to a landmark deal with Iran, enabling him to claim that he brought a comprehensive American peace to the Middle East. Whether he would succeed is another matter. But if he did, Mr. Trump would forever be able to boast that he achieved a result that his predecessor, Joe Biden, never could.

Of course, no American outreach to Iran will be possible without a willing interlocutor on the other side, and Iran's supreme leader, the 85-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has grown increasingly suspicious of talking to America with each passing year. But the ayatollah is not in the best of health, and there is a real possibility that he may exit the scene sometime during Mr. Trump's second term.

In the past few months, Iran has been quietly exploring new overtures to the United States, and its reformist president, Masoud Pezeshkian, appears keen to negotiate a new nuclear deal. It is possible, of course, that whoever succeeds Ayatollah Khamenei will be even more hard-line and more hostile to America. But then again, that's exactly the kind of adversary Mr. Trump likes to deal with.

There is no reason to be naïve about Mr. Trump or the instincts of the people around him. And if there is one country that the United States could easily drift into war with over the next four years, it's Iran. The list of reasons to fear a war is as long as the list of reasons not to.

But it is worth remembering that this is the same president who once criticized his own national security adviser John Bolton — the doyen of the Washington Iran hawks — as a "[warmonger](#)." And historically, he has favored showman-like displays of strength, followed by a sudden and unexpected act of mercy. We got a taste of this last month, when, despite previously saying Israel should "hit" Iran's nuclear facilities, Mr. Trump [told reporters](#) that he was not "looking to do damage to Iran." He added: "I'd like them to be a very successful country."

It feels far-fetched to imagine Donald Trump hosting a peace summit with Iran in his second term — and even more far-fetched that the Islamic republic would be receptive to such a move. But it is even harder to imagine a world in which this conversation can be avoided any longer. Given his limited choices — and as counterintuitive as it may seem — it could just be under this new presidency that the drama of America and Iran sees its concluding act.

John Ghazvinian is executive director of the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania and author of “America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present.” He is working on a book on the history of Iran’s nuclear program.