



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 9, Issue 22, October 2025

ISSUED BY



THE US-IRAN APPROACH TOWARD NUCLEAR TALKS AFTER OCTOBER 7

Prof. Dr. Farida Hamoum

Professor of Political Science, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Jijel

Abstract

This research paper elucidates the interactions and strategic motivations that prompted both the United States and Iran to engage in nuclear negotiations mediated by Oman following the return of US President Donald Trump to the White House in early 2025. The study argues that developments following October 7, including the decline of Iranian geopolitical influence in the Middle East and the weakening of its network of allies (the “Axis of Resistance”) due to military confrontations with Israel, were influential factors in the negotiations. It further contends that there is a reciprocal relationship between this decline in geopolitical influence and the outbreak of the 12-Day War between Israel and Iran, which impacted the course of the Oman-mediated negotiations and the future of US-Iran talks. In other words, there is an assumption that the weakening of the “Axis of Resistance” influenced negotiations before the 12-Day War, just as it contributed to the war’s outbreak, which has redefined and will continue to influence the nuclear talks between Iran and the United States. The study concludes that future negotiations under the Trump administration are anticipated but will be contingent on US conditions; otherwise, Iran faces the prospect of a new military confrontation amid diminished leverage in terms of its regional and nuclear bargaining chips.

Keywords: Nuclear negotiations, “Axis of Resistance,” 12-Day-War, Middle East, Iran, US.

Introduction

During his first term, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran. However, in 2025, he returned to the negotiating table amid a region engulfed in chaos and uncertainty, largely due to Israel's violations of international law and its opening of multiple military fronts against what is known as the "Axis of Resistance"— Iran's regional proxies that serve as a strategic buffer against confrontation with the West. This culminated in a short but consequential 12-Day War.

Negotiation theory typically assumes that parties begin with high demands and gradually make reciprocal concessions to reach common ground. However, in the indirect negotiations between the United States and Iran, the US side reversed this pattern. It began with proposals that some observers described as nearly identical to the 2015 agreement, only to escalate their demands later, threatening to derail the talks and prompting Iranian warnings of withdrawal.

What distinguishes the current US-Iranian negotiations from those preceding the 2015 accord is their expanded scope. They are no longer confined to the nuclear file alone but now encompass Iran's regional role — particularly its support for the "Axis of Resistance"— as well as its ballistic missile program, which has proven to be a significant threat to Israel and neighboring states. This was especially evident during Iran's missile strikes on occupied territories in 2024 and throughout the war with Israel, in retaliation for attacks on its own soil.

For scholars of international affairs, particularly those focused on the Middle East, it is clear that Iran's regional influence has diminished since October 7, and its nuclear program has lost much of its coercive power following the recent conflict. Consequently, Tehran must reassess its strategic posture toward both Israel and the United States if it seeks to avoid another war — one that both sides consider plausible, and which could result not only in the total dismantling of its nuclear infrastructure but in the collapse of its regime and its status as a regional power. This raises a critical question: will Iran's nuclear program be subject to renewed negotiations, or will war dictate the outcome, given the trajectory of indirect talks and the legacy of the 2015 agreement?

To address this question, the study explores the likelihood of new negotiations, albeit under intensified international and US sanctions, and the potential for a short war — used as leverage by Washington and Tel Aviv — especially amid Iran's declining regional clout. The study adopts both descriptive and comparative methodologies. Understanding US-Iranian negotiations requires not only an analysis of surrounding events and their progression but also a comparative lens with the 2015 talks. This dual approach sheds light on Iran's bargaining tools — its nuclear and missile programs and its regional proxies — as instruments of leverage in its dealings with the West.

The Nuclear Negotiations Landscape: A Comparison Between 2015 and 2025

In 2018, during Trump's first presidential term, the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement signed

with Iran in 2015. However, by 2025, Trump returned to the negotiating table, this time seeking a direct and expedited deal — one he described as a “good agreement.” Iran, facing mounting pressure, adopted a cautious approach to defuse the escalating threat, yet refused to engage in what it deemed a humiliating negotiation. Ultimately, war broke out and the talks collapsed.⁽¹⁾

The regional and international environments surrounding the nuclear negotiations in 2015 and those in 2025 differ significantly. These shifts can be outlined as follows:

Nature of the Negotiations and the Involved Parties

The original JCPOA negotiations were conducted between Iran and the P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — the United States, Russia, China, France and the UK — plus Germany), reflecting a multilateral diplomatic effort. In contrast, the 2025 negotiations were indirect and involved only the United States, with Oman serving as a mediator. This shift not only signals a diminished European and Russian role in the process but also underscores Washington’s unilateral approach and its sidelining of former partners.

Following its 2018 withdrawal, the United States labeled the JCPOA a strategic mistake committed by the Obama administration. Iran capitalized on this exit, abandoning its commitments and accelerating its nuclear program. It deployed more advanced centrifuges and increased uranium enrichment to 60%, edging closer to the 90% threshold required for weaponization. Although Biden’s administration initiated indirect talks in 2021 to revive the JCPOA, Iran continued its enrichment activities, and the negotiations ultimately failed.

In the 2025 round, Iran entered talks with a potent bargaining chip: its stockpile of 60%-enriched uranium, which, according to the latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), had reached 400 kilograms. It also possessed a significantly larger number of advanced centrifuges compared to its capabilities in 2015. However, Iran had lost a key leverage point it once held — namely, the regional military strength of its allied militias.

Relations between the United States and Iran remained defined by deep mutual distrust, exacerbated by the collapse of the previous agreement. While mistrust has been a constant since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the 2025 negotiations were marked by each side demanding binding guarantees. Washington insisted on assurances that Iran would not pursue nuclear weapons in the future, while Tehran demanded guarantees that the United States would not withdraw from any new agreement.

Israeli Pressure and Its Impact

The United States has consistently leveraged Israeli threats to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities as a bargaining tool to pressure Tehran into concessions and finalize a deal — both during the 2015 negotiations and in the more recent rounds. What

changed, however, is that the threat turned into military action. War became a mechanism to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear program without the need for prolonged negotiations.

Israel has long opposed any negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear program, not because of doubts about its peaceful nature, but because it fundamentally rejects Iran's retention of a nuclear program in any form. This stance was made clear when Israel launched military action against Iran in the midst of its negotiations with Washington — aiming to prevent Tehran from securing a second agreement that would allow it to preserve its nuclear infrastructure, as it did under the original JCPOA. In fact, Israel's rejection of the 2015 agreement is widely seen as the underlying reason for Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal.⁽²⁾

The Role of Iran's Regional Proxies

To defuse mounting US and Israeli threats, Iran adopted an advanced defensive strategy centered on externalizing its confrontation with the West and avoiding direct engagement. This approach involved supporting resistance groups in Palestine and Lebanon, financing and organizing armed factions in Yemen and Iraq and backing the Assad regime in Syria.

With planning and support from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran-aligned militias and armed factions in Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, Iraq and Syria played a pivotal role in expanding Iranian influence across the Middle East. This field-based expansion reflects one of Iran's core methods for managing regional conflicts —empowering proxy forces without directly entering military confrontations.

Strategically, this model aligns with regional security complex theory (RSCT), which posits that geographically linked states share interconnected security threats. Under this framework, escalation in one area can trigger tensions across the entire region.⁽³⁾

However, this dynamic shifted dramatically after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023. Israel declared war on Hamas, launched a military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, intensified strikes on the Houthis in Yemen and capitalized on the collapse of the Assad regime — an Iranian ally in Syria — to expand its presence in southern Syria. Simultaneously, it initiated military operations in the West Bank. Although the United States carried out airstrikes against Shiite militias in Iraq, Israel did not claim responsibility for these actions. Nevertheless, Iraq was listed among the seven active fronts identified by the Israeli military, signaling a broad regional confrontation.

These developments significantly weakened the “Axis of Resistance”— Iran's network of regional proxies — compared to its position prior to the 2015 nuclear negotiations.

Iran's reliance on loyal armed groups in neighboring countries has long been central to its strategy for projecting regional power and applying indirect pressure on adversaries. These proxies also served as bargaining chips in major nego-

tiations over Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile capabilities. However, the 2023 regional war severely undermined Iran's ability to leverage these assets in the latest round of talks.

The fall of the Assad regime in late 2024 marked a significant and humiliating setback for Iran, unraveling over a decade of investment and influence in Syria, estimated at between \$30 billion and \$50 billion. This collapse disrupted Iran's regional smuggling networks, weakened the so-called Shiite Crescent and forced Tehran to reassess its strategic footprint.⁽⁴⁾ The emergence of a new political order in Syria represents a turning point in the erosion of Iranian influence in both Syria and Lebanon.⁽⁵⁾

The Role of Regional and International Powers in the Negotiations

Tehran has actively sought to strengthen its economic and military ties with China and Russia, entering into strategic partnerships with its most powerful allies to enhance its leverage in negotiations — far beyond what it possessed during the 2015 nuclear agreement. China, as Iran's primary oil customer, has supported the resumption of US-Iranian negotiations, recognizing that stability in the Gulf is vital for the stability of global oil markets and the Chinese economy. Beijing also played a pivotal role in facilitating the 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, restoring diplomatic relations between the two states.

On March 27, 2021, China and Iran signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement aimed at deepening military cooperation across various domains, including joint research, intelligence sharing, military training, weapons manufacturing and strategic development.⁽⁶⁾

On January 17, 2025, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Masoud Pezeshkian signed a treaty to expand economic and military cooperation between Russia and Iran. Framed as a comprehensive strategic partnership, the agreement commits both nations to joint military exercises, technical defense collaboration and close coordination on global and regional security issues. It also includes provisions for mutual defense against external threats, stipulating that neither party shall assist any aggressor targeting the other.

Moscow and Tehran further pledged not to allow their territories to be used for supporting separatist movements or any actions that threaten the territorial integrity of the other. Intelligence and security agencies in both countries are now obligated to exchange information and coordinate responses to shared threats.⁽⁷⁾

Regionally, Iran has pursued reconciliation with Saudi Arabia, restoring diplomatic ties through Chinese mediation in 2023 during President Joe Biden's tenure. Tehran recognizes Riyadh as a key regional actor with close ties to the current US administration, particularly under President Trump. Saudi Arabia played a notable role in Trump's decision to lift sanctions on Syria and its new President Ahmad al-Sharaa. Iran may seek similar support from Riyadh to ease sanctions and improve relations with the West — provided it recalibrates its regional posture toward cooperation.

Strategic Objectives of Iran and the United States

Negotiations are a peaceful mechanism for resolving or preventing conflict, and each party enters the process with distinct goals. The central question is: what motivated Trump to re-engage with Iran after withdrawing from the 2015 agreement, and what prompted Iran to return to the table after demanding that the Biden administration lift all sanctions and provide guarantees against future US withdrawals — conditions that led to the failure of the 2021 talks?

Iran's Stated and Unstated Objectives

Iran has publicly declared that its primary goal in reentering negotiations is to secure sanctions relief and obtain guarantees that the United States will not withdraw from any future agreement. Tehran insists on retaining its peaceful nuclear and missile programs, though it has expressed willingness to offer technical concessions.

Sanctions relief would enable access to foreign currency, facilitate financial exchange and improve trade, thereby boosting purchasing power, fostering economic growth and reducing inflation — which has reached unprecedented levels. Conversely, failed or stalled negotiations would prolong economic sanctions, potentially intensifying them on critical sectors such as oil, energy and banking. This would deepen Iran's economic crisis, increase unemployment and erode purchasing power further, potentially fueling domestic unrest among marginalized populations. Limited partnerships with Russia and China cannot on their own resolve Iran's economic challenges, despite the signing of strategic agreements with both nations.⁽⁸⁾

The real objective behind Iran's engagement in negotiations is to avoid a war with Israel and the United States — especially in light of the declining strength of its military and proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Entering into an open conflict would not grant Iran any strategic advantage, particularly with the United States acting as a direct supporter of Israel. What Iran needs most is time.

Iran has learned how to withstand Western economic sanctions, much like North Korea and Russia. It also benefits from its presence in the BRICS bloc and its growing economic ties with Russia, China and other Asian countries through its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Yet these alignments have not shielded Iran from threats; it has already faced military attacks and must now focus on how to avoid future wars.

It is worth noting that the signing of the 2015 nuclear agreement followed a lengthy negotiation process that began in 2003 between Iran and the European Union, due to Washington's initial refusal to negotiate directly with Tehran. Russia and China later joined the process, turning the talks into a multilateral effort that began in 2006 and culminated in the nuclear deal.⁽⁹⁾ Iran may have entered the latest round of negotiations with the United States, hoping to replicate the 2015 scenario — buying itself as much time as possible to reorganize its strategic assets and rehabilitate its regional proxies.

From the outset, Iran was unwilling to compromise on uranium enrichment or its nuclear program. It aimed to prolong talks to avoid war, especially amid limited support from its leadership, which remains skeptical of negotiations. The dominant “fundamentalists” in the Iranian Parliament oppose any concessions on enrichment, viewing the program as a costly yet indispensable national asset. They insist that any future agreement must not be weaker than the 2015 accord and rejects the shutdown of nuclear facilities similar to those suspended under the previous deal.⁽¹⁰⁾

According to Mohsen Milani,⁽¹¹⁾ Iran perceives its confrontation with Israel as an extension of its broader struggle with the United States. Iran views Israel not only as a hostile entity in its own right but also as a forward-operating proxy of Washington in the region.⁽¹²⁾ Thus, Tehran believed that entering negotiations with the United States might restrain Israel — whose actions had become increasingly erratic post-October 7 — and potentially prevent further military escalation. However, this calculation proved overly optimistic, as war ultimately broke out.

Iran’s regional influence has historically expanded amid state fragility and instability in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Given that these conditions persist, Tehran may yet regain its foothold in the region once the war subsides. Negotiations offer a window to buy time and avoid direct confrontation with Israel until such a recovery is possible.

Hezbollah, Iran’s most formidable proxy in the Levant, retains a significant missile arsenal and the capacity to open a full front should the ceasefire collapse⁽¹³⁾ — especially following the February 2025 truce in southern Lebanon.

Yemen also remains a strategic asset in Iran’s deterrence architecture. Despite the impact of the Gaza peace deal on the Houthis’ narrative and the exposure of their alignment with Iranian policy, their fate is now more closely tied to Tehran. Iran will likely seek to preserve their operational capacity for future conflicts and negotiations.

The United States’ Declared and Undeclared Objectives

Initially, Washington’s stated goal was to reduce Iran’s uranium enrichment levels and ensure the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. However, the US position evolved to demand Iran’s complete abandonment of its nuclear program and the transfer of enriched uranium abroad. This shift stems from deep mistrust of Iran’s intentions and mounting pressure from Israel. The issue is not enrichment per se, but the level: 3%–5% suffices for energy production, while weapons-grade uranium requires 90% enrichment.

Trump sought a diplomatic victory without triggering a military conflict that could spike oil prices and harm the US economy. He needed a deal that demonstrated clear Iranian concessions to satisfy Republicans, the pro-Israel lobby and neoconservatives — many of whom opposed the 2015 agreement⁽¹⁴⁾ for focusing

solely on nuclear non-proliferation while neglecting Iran's ballistic missile program and destabilizing regional activities.

Trump aimed to secure a historic win by brokering a deal that neutralized Iran's threat to Israel, ended the regional nuclear race and positioned him as a peacemaker. Such an achievement could bolster his legacy and potentially earn him the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet, in the end, he permitted Israel to launch a war against Iran and allowed the United States to enter the conflict — even as indirect negotiations were underway.

During the course of negotiations, Iranian officials accused the United States of inconsistency in its positions — at times adopting contradictory stances, saying one thing outside the talks and presenting something entirely different within them.⁽¹⁵⁾ Even the views expressed by US officials appeared to be in stark disagreement with one another. This suggests that one of Washington's underlying goals may have been to swiftly conclude a new agreement on its own terms, with little regard for Iran's position. From the outset, Trump made it clear that Iran faced two options: prosperity or destruction. In other words, if Iran agreed to a deal under his conditions, it would benefit; otherwise, war — and inevitable ruin — would follow.

Trump's two-month ultimatum to Iran to reach a new agreement, coupled with threats of military action, indicates that the United States entered the negotiations with a fixed timeline. Unlike previous rounds, Washington had no intention of allowing Iran to prolong talks and buy time. Instead, it was prepared to resort to force to compel compliance or dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure entirely.

Muscat Rounds: Revealing the Fault Lines of the Dispute

At the outset of the negotiations, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio publicly affirmed Washington's acceptance of Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program. However, this position was later reversed, with the United States demanding the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear capabilities and the inclusion of its ballistic missile program in the talks — an unmistakable escalation in demands. This raised questions about the possibility of mutual concessions and the viability of reaching an agreement acceptable both domestically and internationally. These dynamics came into sharp focus during the third round of negotiations, widely regarded as the most pivotal, as it introduced technical dimensions for the first time and clarified each party's strategic objectives.

The US delegation presented several key demands:

■ Iran must halt uranium enrichment and import all necessary nuclear materials from abroad, with Russia designated as the supplier. This contrasts with the 2015 agreement, which granted Iran the right to enrich uranium and retain its centrifuges.⁽¹⁶⁾

■ US inspectors must be allowed to examine suspect Iranian facilities. Iran agreed to permit their participation within IAEA inspection teams, but strictly limited access to nuclear sites.

■ The United States must verify that Iran is not manufacturing long-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads by inspecting specific military installations — a demand Iran categorically rejected.

■ Iran must either ship enriched uranium exceeding 3.67% to Russia or convert it into fuel plates unsuitable for weaponization. Iran responded that, given the absence of binding guarantees from the United States, it would retain the uranium under IAEA supervision, with written permission to export and utilize it should the United States violate or withdraw from the agreement.

■ US companies should be allowed to invest in Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Iran welcomed this, offering US firms access to several projects. The Iranian foreign minister confirmed that Iran plans to build 19 new nuclear power plants, and the United States is invited to participate.

■ The agreement must not be time-bound, unlike the previous nuclear deal.

Iran's counter-demands included:

■ Full and immediate lifting of US sanctions upon signing a new agreement, starting with those imposed after Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA, and guarantees against their reimposition under different pretexts.

■ Binding enforcement mechanisms to ensure US compliance, including penalties for violations and provisions allowing Iran to suspend its obligations if the United States fails to uphold its commitments.

■ Credible guarantees that the United States will not exit any future agreement, regardless of changes in administration.

■ Compensation for damages incurred due to the US withdrawal from the 2015 deal, release of frozen Iranian assets abroad and reopening of banking channels.

■ US responsibility for halting European threats to trigger the JCPOA's snap-back clause, which would reinstate international sanctions.

■ Cessation of all hostile US actions — military, economic, political and media — either during negotiations or following any agreement.⁽¹⁷⁾

Iran considers uranium enrichment a sovereign right, protected under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and non-negotiable. The United States, however, views it as a strategic threat requiring complete cessation — not merely reduction. This position evolved into a demand for “zero enrichment” on Iranian soil.

Washington further escalated its demands, calling not only for zero enrichment but for the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear infrastructure — a red line Tehran refuses to cross. Iran maintains that its nuclear program is strictly peaceful. Chair of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Ebrahim Azizi reaffirmed that the Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect Ira-

nian Nation's Interests passed in December 2020 obligates the government to uphold Iran's nuclear rights, including enrichment.⁽¹⁸⁾

The Impact of the 12-Day War on Negotiations

In his book *Iran's Rise and Rivalry with the US in the Middle East*, Mohsen Milani argues that Israel functions as the forward arm of US policy in the region — applying military and intelligence pressure on Iran, while Washington handles sanctions and political containment. Every Israeli strike inside Iran or against its allies is interpreted in Tehran as part of its broader confrontation with the United States.⁽¹⁹⁾ Thus, any Israeli action is perceived as having prior US approval, including decisions to go to war.

The war began on June 13, 2025, and lasted for 12 days — hence its name, the 12-Day War. It marked a shift from Iran's reliance on shadow wars and proxy conflicts in its struggle against rivals in the Middle East and the United States, toward direct confrontation with Israel and the United States.

Many observers had ruled out the possibility of Israel or the United States launching a war against Iran during the negotiation period, citing a range of strategic calculations. Some of these considerations may have previously prevented war altogether, while others were directly tied to the ongoing negotiations between Tehran and Washington.

Among the key reasons was that the United States likely had no interest in toppling the Iranian ruling system, as such an outcome would not serve its interests or contribute to regional stability. Washington also feared that war could severely impact the global economy — especially energy markets — given Iran's control over the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical maritime trade routes. In the Strait of Hormuz alone, nearly 20 million barrels of oil pass through daily, accounting for around 30% of global oil trade.⁽²⁰⁾

Additionally, US calculations factored in the threat posed by Iran's regional proxies. Despite their current weakened state, these groups still possess military capabilities and represent a threat to Israel — whether it is the Houthis, Hezbollah or the resilient Hamas in Gaza. Of particular concern was the possibility of the Houthis moving to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Even while engaged in military confrontations with Israel, they retain the capacity to disrupt international shipping and damage the global economy.

The war's impact on the negotiations can be summarized as follows:

Israel's Preemptive Strike to Block a US-Iran Agreement

Many experts believed Israel would refrain from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities or conducting assassinations, based on Trump's stated preference for diplomacy and his desire to achieve a breakthrough after failing to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In reality, Israel opposed any US deal with Iran. For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Iranian threat — embodied in its nuclear and missile programs —

is a key political asset. A US-Iran agreement would undermine his narrative and weaken his grip on power.

Israel has historically employed preemptive strikes to neutralize emerging nuclear threats, as seen in its attacks on Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and Syria's suspected facility in 2007.⁽²¹⁾ It has also pursued a campaign of assassinations targeting Iranian nuclear scientists and military commanders, both inside and outside Iran. When intelligence suggested Iran was nearing nuclear weapons capability, Israel launched strikes to delay its progress by several years.

Israel is unlikely to tolerate prolonged negotiations that could allow Iran to regain regional influence. The continued existence of the IRGC and its Quds Force means the "Axis of Resistance" — despite its current fragility — could be revived post-conflict. The Quds Force serves as the IRGC's external arm, coordinating with and supporting Iran's regional proxies through training, arms and intelligence.

US Strikes on Iran's Nuclear Facilities

Trump gave Iran a 60-day window to reach a nuclear agreement. However, Iran's persistent stalling and rigid conditions during the negotiations eroded Washington's confidence in Tehran's seriousness, ultimately prompting the United States to greenlight Israeli military strikes against Iranian targets.⁽²²⁾

From Tehran's perspective, the US entry into the war alongside Israel was seen as a betrayal of the negotiation process. Iranian officials accused Washington of using diplomacy as a smokescreen to enable Israel's surprise attacks at a moment of strategic vulnerability — just as Iran was preparing for both open war with Israel and a sixth round of talks with the Trump administration. The timing of the strikes, before any formal collapse of negotiations, reinforced Iranian distrust in the United States as a credible negotiating partner.

On June 22, 2025, the United States bombed Iran's nuclear facilities in Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan using bunker-busting munitions — technology possessed exclusively by the United States. This raised a critical question: why did Washington enter a war while negotiations were still underway?

Several strategic considerations help explain this decision:

- To conclude the war swiftly, as prolonged conflict would be costly for Israel, which was already engaged on multiple fronts: Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

- Israel lacked the military capabilities and specialized weaponry to penetrate deeply fortified Iranian nuclear sites like Fordow and Natanz.

- The absence of escalation by Iran's regional proxies signaled a constrained operational environment and a temporary tactical retreat. This weakened Iran's ability to leverage asymmetric warfare as a pressure tool.⁽²³⁾ Notably, militias such as Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) did not target US assets, nor did they launch retaliatory strikes against Israel, unlike their initial support for Gaza at the war's outset.

This raises the question: who leveraged whom? Did the United States use Israel to pressure Iran into concessions, or did Israel use the United States to distract Tehran with negotiations while executing surprise strikes? Trump had openly stated during the talks that Israeli military action against Iran was highly probable. Most observers agree that Israel would not have acted without US approval.

It appears both Washington and Tel Aviv benefited from each other's moves, suggesting coordinated planning. Israel has long sought war with Iran but cannot proceed without US military backing. Meanwhile, the United States repeatedly warned Iran that war was a viable option should negotiations fail. The two-month deadline and the element of surprise served as a tactical demonstration that military force remains on the table to compel Iranian concessions in future talks.

Negotiations Between War and Diplomacy

The US Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Iran's centrifuges might still be intact beneath the rubble of the three targeted sites. The IAEA also announced that it could not account for 410 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60% — enough to produce 10 nuclear warheads — suggesting the Iranian nuclear threat remains.⁽²⁴⁾

Thus, despite Trump's declaration that the joint Israeli-US strikes had eliminated Iran's nuclear program, the reality is that they merely delayed its progress. The nuclear file remains unresolved and contentious, requiring a strategic decision: return to negotiations or repeat the path of war.

The Diplomatic Option

Israel — and behind it, the United States — now faces a stark binary in light of the enduring Iranian nuclear threat: war or a return to negotiations. The latter may prove the more pragmatic path, as another round of open conflict would exact steep costs on all parties involved, especially in the absence of any guarantee of decisive military victory.⁽²⁵⁾

The war inflicted heavy losses on all sides. Iran's nuclear infrastructure was severely damaged, its scientists and military commanders killed and its missile capabilities degraded. Israel endured Iranian missile strikes deep into its territory, disrupting daily life and exposing vulnerabilities in its deterrence posture. The United States, meanwhile, depleted a quarter of its THAAD missile stockpile defending Israel, according to a CNN report published on May 28, 2025.⁽²⁶⁾

Iran, for its part, does not seek an existential war. During the 12-Day War, it repeatedly signaled a preference for de-escalation, even issuing advance notice of its retaliatory strike on the US Al-Udeid base in Qatar — a gesture acknowledged by Trump.⁽²⁷⁾ This suggests Tehran's intent to avoid direct conflict with Washington.

Moreover, Iran cannot rely on Russia or China for military support in a future war. Despite signing strategic agreements with both powers, neither took concrete steps to defend Iran during the recent attacks. Russia limited its response

to verbal condemnation, forcing Iran into a defensive posture and weakening its deterrence capabilities.⁽²⁸⁾

Beyond the issue of trust between Iran and Russia, Tehran has long harbored grievances over Moscow's past actions. Russia previously took part in imposing sanctions on Iran and stalled arms deals, prompting accusations from Iranian officials — including former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif — that it obstructed a genuine opportunity to revive the nuclear agreement.

Behrouz Esbati, a senior commander in the IRGC, went further, accusing Russia of contributing to the downfall of Bashar al-Assad and collaborating with Israel in assassinations targeting IRGC officers in Syria. He claimed that Russia deliberately disabled air defense systems in coordination with Israeli strikes. According to Esbati, much of Russia's conduct following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood served the interests of the Israeli occupation.⁽²⁹⁾

Given this context, negotiations with the United States remain a viable option. Iran has long employed tactical flexibility⁽³⁰⁾ — what its political literature calls “heroic flexibility” — to navigate existential threats and buy time.

The Triad of Negotiations, Sanctions and War

Iran prefers diplomacy over war to resolve its nuclear dispute with the West, particularly the United States. Negotiations offer time to recover and rebuild its regional influence, using its proxies as bargaining chips — as it did in previous talks.

However, the United States appears unwilling to allow Iran such latitude. It has urged European allies to pressure Tehran by reactivating the JCPOA's snap-back mechanism. France, Germany and the UK formally notified the UN Security Council of Iran's alleged violations, prompting a vote on September 26, 2025, to reinstate international sanctions. A Russian-Chinese proposal to delay enforcement and extend the 2015 agreement by six months was rejected.

Iran continues to avoid open war with the United States but seeks indirect means of deterrence. It is likely to rebuild its regional proxies in preparation for future conflict with Israel or even the United States. Tehran will also aim to deepen ties with China and Russia and improve relations with Gulf states — especially Saudi Arabia — to avoid facing multiple hostile fronts.

Despite setbacks, Iran has not abandoned its regional allies. In Iraq, the PMF, backed by allied parliamentary factions, proposed legislation to institutionalize their military and political presence — ensuring continued Iranian influence across the region.

The United States has opposed this law, viewing it as a direct extension of Iranian power. Washington suspects Iran of covertly integrating its proxies into official security structures for political leverage, as part of a broader effort to recalibrate its regional strategy.⁽³¹⁾ Western powers continue to pressure Iran through sanctions, diplomacy, military strikes and war. Yet, negotiations remain the most effective tool. While war delayed Iran's nuclear progress, it did not eliminate the

threat. The current US-European strategy hinges on renewed talks, backed by intensified sanctions, to compel Iran to accept Western terms — this time from a position of diminished regional influence.

Iran now finds itself in a precarious position. President Pezeshkian confirmed that after the UN vote on the snapback mechanism, the United States demanded Iran surrender its enriched uranium stockpile within three months — a condition he deemed unacceptable. He attributed the failure to reach consensus on the snapback mechanism to Washington's unreasonable demands, raising the prospect of renewed war if Iran fails to comply — just as it did after the previous 60-day deadline.

Despite US and Israeli claims that their strikes destroyed Iran's nuclear program, intelligence reports and expert assessments suggest otherwise. The damage was severe, but temporary — delaying Iran's capabilities by months or perhaps years.⁽³²⁾

Iran still possesses significant quantities of enriched uranium at 60%, 20% and 3%–5% levels, along with thousands of advanced centrifuges, some of which were relocated to the fortified underground known as Kuh-e Kolang Gaz La or Pickaxe Mountain. This gives Tehran the ability to resume enrichment and potentially produce weapons-grade uranium in the future — either independently or with support from Russia or China. In short, Iran's strategy of delay and time-buying may once again place war on the table.⁽³³⁾

Conclusion

The war waged jointly by the United States and Israel against Iran significantly weakened Tehran's negotiating leverage, subjecting it to mounting pressures and strategic constraints. Among these were the temporary sidelining of its regional proxies and the disruption of its nuclear program — previously a cornerstone of its deterrence posture. Yet, the military strikes also revealed the limitations of force as a definitive solution to dismantle Iran's nuclear and ballistic capabilities, especially given their high cost. This reality tilts the balance toward viewing diplomacy as the more viable path for reaching a renewed nuclear agreement.

However, Iran's persistent strategy of delay, opacity and time-buying in its nuclear posture may provoke Washington and Tel Aviv to resort once again to military strikes — this time as a coercive tool to accelerate agreement under terms favorable to the Trump administration. The 12-Day War stands as a testament to Trump's approach: negotiations with Iran are possible, but only on US terms and within a timeframe dictated by Washington — otherwise, war remains the alternative.

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