



Possibilities Architects:
Inspiring Ascending Beyond

A Deal Tehran Could Take
How Iran Should End the War

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Iran did not start its war with the United States and Israel. But more than a month in, the Islamic Republic is clearly winning it. American and Israeli forces have spent weeks incessantly bombing Iranian territory, killing thousands of people and damaging hundreds of buildings, all in hopes of toppling the country's government. Yet Iran has held the line and successfully defended its interests. It has maintained continuity of leadership even as its top officials have been assassinated, and it has repeatedly hit back at its aggressors even as they strike at its military, civilian, and industrial facilities. The Americans and the Israelis who started the conflict with delusions of forcing capitulation thus find themselves in a quagmire without an exit strategy. The Iranians, by contrast, have pulled off a historic feat of resistance. To some Iranians, this success is reason to continue fighting until the aggressors are adequately punished, rather than to search for a negotiated ending. Every night since February 28, large crowds of proud Iranians have gathered across the country to show their defiance by shouting, "No capitulation, no compromise, fight with America." After all, the United States has proved that it cannot be trusted in talks and that it will not respect Iran's sovereignty. By this logic, there is no reason to engage with the country now and offer it an off-ramp. Instead, Tehran should press its advantage, continuing to strike U.S. bases and blocking commerce in the Strait of Hormuz until Washington fundamentally alters its regional presence and posture. Yet although continuing to fight the United States and Israel might be psychologically satisfying, it will lead only to the further destruction of civilian lives and infrastructure. These actors, desperate after failing to achieve any of their objectives, are increasingly resorting to targeting vital pharmaceutical, energy, and industrial sites and randomly hitting innocent civilians. The violence is also slowly drawing in more countries, threatening to turn a regional conflagration into a global one. And regrettably, international organizations have been bullied by the United States into staying silent in the face of Washington's many atrocities, including its massacre of nearly 170 schoolchildren on the first day of the war. Tehran, then, should use its upper hand not to keep fighting but to declare victory and make a deal that both ends this conflict and prevents the next one. It should offer to place limits on its nuclear program and to reopen the Strait of Hormuz in exchange for

an end to all sanctions—a deal Washington wouldn't take before but might accept now. Iran should also be prepared to accept a mutual nonaggression pact with the United States in which both countries pledge to not strike each other in the future. It could offer economic interactions with the United States, which would be a win for both the American and the Iranian people. All of these outcomes would enable Iranian officials to focus less on protecting their country from foreign adversaries and more on improving the lives of their people domestically. Tehran, in other words, could secure the new, brilliant future Iranians deserve. U.S. President Donald Trump, despite his weakened position or maybe because of it, continues to issue contradictory and confusing statements about negotiations. On Wednesday, Trump gave a speech in which he simultaneously insulted all Iranians by pledging to bomb Iran “back to the stone ages, where they belong” while promising, as he has time and again, that Washington's military campaign was just a few weeks from being complete. But the White House is clearly worried that rising energy costs, which were created by the American bombardment, are a political liability, and this plan would offer Trump a well-timed off-ramp. In fact, it could turn his huge miscalculation into an opportunity to claim a lasting victory for peace.

TAKE THE WIN

Iranians are intensely angry with the United States—and not just because of its present aggression. Since the turn of millennium, the Islamic Republic and its people have been repeatedly betrayed by U.S. officials. Iran provided assistance to the United States against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, only for President George W. Bush to include Tehran in his “axis of evil” and threaten to strike it. President Barack Obama's administration negotiated and struck the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran's leaders, but Tehran's verified, meticulous compliance with the agreement did not lead the administration to normalize Iran's global economic relations, as it had promised. Iranian compliance also did not stop Trump from tearing the deal apart and then following it with a vicious campaign of “maximum pressure”: strict sanctions designed to impoverish Iran's 90 million people. Those policies continued under President Joe Biden, even though he had promised to resurrect diplomacy. When Trump returned to office for a second term, Washington's approach became even more misleading. The White House said it was interested in striking a new deal, and Iran sent its most capable diplomats and experts to negotiate. But Trump quickly proved to be unserious. Instead of deploying experienced envoys, he sent two real estate developer confidantes—his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and his golf buddy, Steve Witkoff—who were completely illiterate on both geopolitics and nuclear technicalities. When they

predictably failed to understand Iran's generous offers to reach a deal, the White House launched its massive, armed assault against Iranian civilians. As a result, a large portion of the Iranian population views as heresy any talk of ending this war through diplomacy instead of through continued resistance and pressure against embattled aggressors. Iranians have little interest in speaking to American officials who have betrayed them repeatedly. But although this perspective is understandable, the Islamic Republic will ultimately be better off if it can end the war sooner rather than later. Prolonged hostility will cause a greater loss of precious lives and irreplaceable resources without actually altering the existing stalemate, particularly as the United States and Israel keep targeting Iranian infrastructure. Although Iran is capable of obliterating the region's infrastructure in retaliation, that hardly matters to the United States, which views all its so-called Arab allies in the region merely as shields it can use in defense of Israel. And the destruction of the region's infrastructure will not compensate Iran's losses. Continued fighting might also produce a U.S. ground invasion. Although it would be a desperation move that would drive Washington into an even deeper quagmire, a ground invasion would hardly provide gains for Iran. Finally, if the United States packs up and leaves before the two sides reach a deal, Iran will not be able to cash in on all the proceeds of its valiant resistance to Washington's aggression. If the two sides do manage to opt for talks, they can pursue one of two outcomes. The first is a formal or informal cease-fire agreement. At first glance, this might seem like the best way forward. It is certainly the one of least resistance. To get a cease-fire, after all, Tehran, Washington, and their allies would only have to lay down their weapons. They would not need to resolve the underlying tensions that have plagued their relationship for decades. But any cease-fire would, inherently, be fragile. The two states would remain deeply suspicious and skeptical of each other precisely because they wouldn't have addressed their fundamental disagreements. It thus wouldn't take much—another miscalculation, misplaced political opportunism—for the shooting to resume. Officials should therefore aim for the second outcome: a comprehensive peace deal. They should, in other words, use this catastrophe as an opportunity to end 47 years of belligerence. The current conflict, horrible as it is, could make reaching such an agreement easier. That is because it has revealed certain truths about West Asia that Tehran and Washington can no longer ignore. For starters, it has shown that the United States is incapable of destroying Iran's nuclear or missile programs, even when it operates alongside Israel and with the financial and logistical support of its Persian Gulf partners. These programs are simply too entrenched and too dispersed to be bombed away. In fact, when it comes to nuclear questions, all the U.S. and Israeli strikes have done is animate debate about

whether Iran should actually abandon the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and change its nonproliferation doctrine. The strikes have also made it abundantly clear that the news of the demise of the “axis of resistance”—Iran’s network of regional partners—was greatly exaggerated. If anything, the aggression has reenergized resistance to U.S. foreign policy across the global South, in some parts of Europe, and even in parts of the United States, where some of Trump’s MAGA supporters have rejected his “Israel first” policies. For the region, meanwhile, the war proves that trying to outsource or purchase security from the United States is a losing strategy. For years, Arab countries have believed that they could safeguard themselves by paying the United States to establish military bases in their territory. Meanwhile, they largely rejected or ignored Iran’s offers of regional security arrangements, starting with its 1985 suggestion—enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 598—that the coastal states of the Persian Gulf establish a regional security arrangement and continuing with its offers of a nonaggression pact in 2015 and its Hormuz Peace Endeavor in 2019. Arab states thought that such proposals were unnecessary because, when push came to shove, U.S. officials would help them manage relations with Iran and protect them from any regional conflict. But instead, the United States decided to start bombing the Islamic Republic despite their verbal—and for some, sincere—objections and used its bases on their territory to carry out its campaign, as anyone in their right mind should have expected. As a result, Arab countries have become theaters of war, which is exactly what they wished to avoid. All of these outcomes validate Tehran’s long-standing assertions about both itself and the regional order. But with its strengthened self-confidence, Iran has its own lesson to internalize. It must accept that its nuclear technology has not deterred aggression. If anything, it provided a pretext for Israeli and U.S. attacks. Iran has, of course, also proved that Israel’s illegal nuclear weapons program cannot protect Israelis from a daily barrage of piercing missiles and inexpensive drones. This failure is all the more reason to be skeptical that a nuclear program will safeguard Iran’s security, no matter how advanced it grows. Instead, Iran’s civilian and military officials have all confirmed that the most effective component of the country’s successful defense has been its resilient people.

PREPARING PEACE

These facts mean that reciprocity will be key to any settlement, including at the earliest phases. To start the peace process, for example, all parties in West Asia would have to agree to stop fighting against each other. Iran, in cooperation with Oman, would have to ensure the safe passage of commercial vessels through the Strait of Hormuz. But American officials must permit the Strait of Hormuz to be open for Iran, too. The biggest irony of geography is that, although it borders Iranian territory, the strait has been

effectively closed to Iran for years because of U.S. sanctions. This has caused tremendous corruption inside Iran and huge profiteering by some ungrateful neighbors. Thus, even before a final agreement is reached, the United States must allow the unhindered sale of Iranian oil and its byproducts and the safe repatriation of their proceeds. As Iran and the United States take these immediate measures, they can start articulating a permanent peace deal. Much of this agreement would likely address nuclear issues. Iran, for instance, would commit to never seeking nuclear weapons and to down-blending its entire stockpile of enriched uranium to an agreed level below 3.67 percent. Simultaneously, the United States would move to terminate all Security Council resolutions against Iran, eliminate U.S. unilateral sanctions against Iran, and encourage its partners to do the same. Iran must be allowed to actively participate in global supply chains without hinderance or discrimination. The Iranian parliament, in turn, would ratify the International Atomic Energy Agency Additional Protocol, thus placing all its nuclear facilities under permanent international monitoring. The United States has, of course, asked for more stringent conditions—namely, zero enrichment. But U.S. officials know full well that such demands are fanciful. The United States will not be able to get from Iran what it tried and failed to achieve in two unprovoked wars of aggression. These compromises would not resolve every atomic dispute between Tehran and Washington. But they would settle most of them, and outside countries could help address the biggest remaining challenge: what to do with Iran's uranium. China and Russia, together with the United States, could help establish a fuel enrichment consortium with Iran and interested neighbors in the Persian Gulf, which should then become the sole fuel enrichment facility for West Asia. Iran would transfer all its enriched material and equipment to that space. As another regional component of the peace plan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen—together with permanent members of the Security Council and possibly Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey—should begin cooperating on a regional security network to ensure nonaggression, cooperation, and freedom of navigation throughout West Asia. That includes establishing formal arrangements between Iran and Oman for the continuous safe passage of ships through the Strait of Hormuz. To further consolidate peace, Iran and the United States should initiate mutually beneficial trade, economic, and technological cooperation. Iran, for example, could invite oil companies, including interested American ones, to immediately facilitate exports to buyers. Iran, the United States, and Persian Gulf countries might all partner on projects involving energy and advanced technologies. Washington should also commit to financing the reconstruction of damages caused by the wars in 2025 and 2026 in Iran—including by compensating civilians for their losses. Some U.S. officials might balk at

having to make such payments. But Iranian diplomats will not be able to proceed with a deal otherwise, and the cost of financing Iran's rebuilding will likely be far less than continuing to wage this expensive and unpopular war. Finally, Iran and the United States should announce and sign a permanent nonaggression pact. By doing so, they would commit to not use or threaten to use force against each other. Iran and the United States would then terminate the various terrorism-related designations they have affixed to each other. They would explore dispatching diplomats to serve in their respective interest sections, restoring consular services, and removing travel restrictions on each other's citizens. This agreement will not be easy to make. Iranians will remain deeply skeptical of Washington's intentions throughout negotiations. Trump and his officials, meanwhile, will continue to view Tehran with doubt. China and Russia, probably along with some regional states, may have to provide guarantees to address these serious mutual anxieties.

But this war, horrible as it is, has opened the door for a durable settlement. Iranians may be outraged, but they can push forward knowing that they stood tall in the face of a massive and illegal military onslaught by two nuclear-armed powers. U.S. officials may still dislike the Islamic Republic, but they now realize that the government isn't going anywhere—and that they will have to live alongside it. Emotions may be high, and each side is boasting about its war-front victories. But history best remembers those who make peace.