Trump must shut the door on any deal short of Iran’s surrender

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 22.02.2026

“The president is curious why they haven’t surrendered. Why under this kind of pressure with the amount of naval power we have there, why haven’t they come to us and said ‘we declare we don’t want weapons, and this is what we’re willing to do.'” Those remarks were made by Steve Witkoff, US President Donald Trump’s envoy, in an interview with *Fox News*.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could hardly have hoped for a better acknowledgment of his steadfastness in the face of American pressure. Witkoff’s statement will almost certainly be presented in Iran as clear proof that Washington’s military moves are intended merely to intimidate, threaten and pressure Tehran into accepting the framework the Americans are offering for a diplomatic agreement.

Although President Trump himself has said the military threat is meant to reinforce diplomatic efforts, he has also left room to suspect that such statements are part of a negotiating tactic rather than a reflection of his true intentions. Witkoff’s comments from within the administration leave little space for that possibility.

From the perspective of Iran’s leadership, as long as it believes the option of a deal remains open and preferable in Trump’s eyes, it will view that as an insurance policy for the regime’s survival, which it values above all else.

Any deal would be bad

From Israel’s standpoint, the more appropriate way to confront the Iranian regime’s threats is to work toward its downfall. Even before the current security tensions, developments had strengthened optimism about that prospect. The achievements of Operation Rising Lion and the success of the sanctions policy have placed the regime under existential strain. The widespread killing of protesters, aimed at swiftly crushing unrest, demonstrated how seriously the regime viewed the threat.

Recent reports of renewed protests at universities suggest that the spirit of the

regime's opponents has not been broken, despite harsh repression and despite disappointment over the absence of meaningful external support.

Ultimately, Tehran's leadership cannot resolve the country's fundamental problems and will struggle to offer its citizens a better future. On the contrary, conditions are likely to worsen as sanctions expand and intensify, and as Iran's allies grapple with their own crises. Such a reality ensures continued potential for sustained unrest within the Islamic Republic.

Under these circumstances, any deal with Tehran would serve as a lifeline for the regime. Ending the crisis without one, while tightening sanctions to hasten its collapse, is preferable to an agreement that might temporarily curb its ambitions but ultimately ensure its survival.

Even if President Trump continues to seek only "a better nuclear deal," he will struggle to achieve it as long as Iran's leadership believes it holds the switch that can halt the war machine. He should set a declared deadline for the conclusion of talks and make clear that once hostilities erupt, the only relevant agreement with Iran will be a surrender agreement.

Such an approach would also dispel reports that the US might carry out a limited strike and then give Iran another opportunity to return to the negotiating table. There must be no option that conveys the message: There is no need to hurry; there will be a second chance.

Defining the goals of military action

In any case, once operational conditions for military action are met, the likelihood of such action increases. The most important decision Trump would face is defining the objectives of the war. He would need to choose between two primary alternatives.

The first would be a military operation designed to compel the regime to accept a deal that meets US demands. Regime change would remain a desirable outcome that might result from weakening the leadership, but it would not be defined as a direct objective.

The second alternative would be a powerful and prolonged campaign aimed at creating conditions for replacing the regime. Such a campaign would seek to

destroy all the regime's vital centers of gravity, including the political leadership, military command and senior intelligence officials, as well as its strategic capabilities at sea, in the air and on land. It would also target dual-use infrastructure that serves the military arms of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

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