Trump’s moment of decision: force Iran’s surrender or squander a historic opening

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 24.03.2026

The scale of this war’s achievements and the reach of its impact will be shaped by the arrangements forged at its conclusion. Even now, one thing can be said: Iran’s rush toward negotiations under fire – and after the elimination of its supreme leader and a large part of its leadership – may signal the beginning of a surrender.

“Accepting this decision is more bitter and lethal for me than drinking a cup of poison” – those were the words of Iran’s supreme leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, in his famous address of July 20, 1988, in which he explained his acceptance of the ceasefire with Iraq and his retreat from the call to fight until victory. Eight years of bloody war were required to bring him to that point.

Experts argued at the time that this was the first instance in the history of modern revolutions in which a revolutionary leader had made such an extreme reversal on such a fundamental matter. The speech was considered a defining moment, precisely because of the sharp shift from the rhetoric of war-until-victory to painful compromise. The phrase “drinking a cup of poison” has since entered the lexicon of Iranian politics to describe situations in which a leader is compelled to make a pragmatic decision, contrary to his ideological convictions, in order to save the state or the regime.

Despite Iranian denials that advanced discussions between the parties are underway, every sign points to a mutual American and Iranian desire to reach an agreement. The coming days will show how far Khomeini’s successors in Tehran are willing to walk the precedent-setting path he blazed.

According to reports on *Al-Mayadeen* (the Lebanese television channel affiliated with Hezbollah), the conditions Iran is placing on ending the war are sweeping. They include demands for guarantees against the resumption of hostilities, the closure of US military bases in the region, the payment of reparations to Iran, and a new order in the Strait of Hormuz that would expand Iran’s control over it.

These can be assumed to be opening positions – negotiating tactics also designed to show regime supporters that it is not crawling to the table on its stomach.

In any case, Trump will have to accept that for as long as the Iranian regime exists – whoever its representatives may be – it will not change its aspirations and will not change its ways. On the contrary, the current war will provide it with a clear justification for the view that only a military nuclear capability can guarantee its survival. Accordingly, it will spare no effort to achieve precisely that.

Preventing a swift recovery

The first challenge Washington will have to address in any arrangement with Iran is preventing the rapid recovery of the regime. The easing of military pressure, in itself, will already create conditions for that. To prevent it, Washington will need to keep in place, for a considerable period, the economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

Such a decision will also reduce both the disappointment of Iran's civilian masses, who are still waiting for a green light from Trump to take to the streets, and the anxiety of the Gulf states, which understand that they may now be left alone facing a wounded Iranian beast.

The second challenge is the nuclear issue – not only the removal and destruction of the enriched uranium in Iran's possession, but also the prevention of any enrichment on Iranian soil at any level, along with effective oversight mechanisms to permanently foreclose the possibility of producing or acquiring nuclear weapons.

A further challenge concerns the imposition of limits on the missile program – range, types, and quantities.

The fourth challenge is halting Iranian support for proxy organizations. These challenges, too, are tied to the resources Iran will have at its disposal to rebuild its capabilities, which is another reason not to rush in unfreezing existing restrictions.

No fire and no recovery

The prevailing approach is that it is right for discussions on the core issues to

take place precisely while military pressure is at its peak. At that moment, it will be easier to extract concessions. However, the cost of this approach may be the loss of remaining chances of toppling the regime. The moment a comprehensive arrangement is signed – one that releases resources to Iran – the regime's recovery and rehabilitation will also begin.

The way to address this challenge is to decouple the ceasefire agreement from the arrangement on core issues. That is, not to settle for a halt to fighting if it comes with a lifeline for the regime, but also not to rush toward a comprehensive arrangement that enables its rehabilitation. A ceasefire without regime rehabilitation is preferable to an arrangement that preserves it.

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