

They pressured Carter to invade Kharg Island too but he didn't



By Martin Di Caro
Independent journalist

OPINION

The president was in a humiliating bind.

The American people were obsessed with the harrowing images of blind-folded and bound hostages beamed into their homes by the nightly news-casts, and they prayed their government would find a way to free them. Desperate for a way out, some White House advisers prodded the president to go to war.

This is not the story of the Trump administration, which is trapped in a quagmire of the president's own creation. It is the dilemma that swallowed President Jimmy Carter from November 4, 1979, when hundreds of zealous Iranian students overran the US embassy in Tehran and took 63 captives. Three more were seized at a nearby building. Of the many possible parallels between then and now, one is the importance of a small coral island in the northern Persian Gulf about 20 miles from the Iranian coast. Kharg Island is home to a major oil terminal through which nearly all Iranian oil exports pass. President Donald Trump says he's thinking about seizing it, a threat he has made numerous times since he launched a war with Iran on February 28.

But Trump is not the first president to mull such an operation. In a largely forgotten footnote to his presidency, Jimmy Carter was presented with plans to capture the island but rejected them. The reasons for his restraint still hold force today.

In a top-secret memo in late December 1979, national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski asked Carter "to consider military actions which contribute to [Ayatollah Khomeini's] downfall, and thus secure the release of the hostages". Seizing Kharg and two other islands near the Strait of Hormuz's entrance could, in Brzezinski's estimation, impose "a protracted humiliation on Khomeini, which could only be terminated through the release of the hostages". He hoped to "mesh" military action "with covert political action designed to create an alternative to Khomeini". In other words, regime change.

As the Washington Post revealed the following March, the risky plan called for amphibious assault ships to steam up the Persian Gulf and disembark US Marines. "Once on the island, they or technicians with them would take over the oil lines," the Post reported, noting that backers of the plan hoped that cutting off oil revenue "would put tremendous pressure on the Iranian leader without reaping the whirlwind of criticism" that would result from bombing mainland Iran.

As Edward Luce wrote in his 2025 biography of Brzezinski, Carter dismissed the idea of deploying military force to pressure Ayatollah Khomeini to free the captives: "Such actions would only rally Iranians around Khomeini, he said." Brzezinski grew frustrated at Carter's "stubborn instinct to do what he thought was right, even if it damaged his reelection prospects," Luce noted.

Four months later, on April 10, 1980, with the captives still in captivity and Americans obsessing over their fate, Brzezinski wrote another memo to Carter lamenting the lack of diplomatic progress and proposing military strikes.

In Brzezinski's six-step plan to save the captives, step 5 was "Closure of Kharg



Island and/or occupation of the Tunbs and Abu Musa at the mouth of the Persian Gulf". Once again, Carter chose restraint.

"President Carter recognized that military action in the Persian Gulf was too risky and could trigger a wider war," University of Texas historian Jeremi Suri tells RS. "The best leverage Carter had was to try to work with the new government behind the scenes to protect and release American personnel." Luce tells RS that Carter had a "radically different" view of military force than Brzezinski. "In spite of the latter's ceaseless efforts to get Carter to take kinetic action — seizing Kharg Island, imposing a naval blockade, bombing Iranian oil refineries, and various other proposals — Carter did not come close to approving military action, except for Operation Eagle Claw. No US president before or since has been so reluctant to deploy the Pentagon."

Under withering pressure to do something to save the American captives, Carter authorized on April 24, 1980, the long-planned Eagle Claw rescue mission that crashed and burned in a desert 200 miles from Tehran, another humiliation piled upon a seemingly impotent administration. Eagle Claw's failure led to the same consequence that bombing Iran or seizing Kharg Island might have produced, according to historian John Ghazvinian. "If there had been any possibility of a diplomatic breakthrough in the hostage crisis, it was now gone," Ghazvinian wrote in his history of US-Iran relations.

There are no captives to rescue in Iran today. President Trump is captive instead to his judgment, having attacked Iran twice in eight months during negotiations. Trump may be desperate

to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, but Iran's new hardline leadership cadre has proven itself capable of withstanding immense pressure. Seizing Kharg Island as leverage, therefore, seems destined to fail. This won't stop some in Washington from supporting it.

Appearing on CBS' "Face the Nation" on July 12, Former CENTCOM Commander Ret. Gen. Frank McKenzie echoed Brzezinski's long-discarded advice. "What we're talking about is modifying the views and actions of an extreme hardline regime," and seizing Kharg Island could well do the trick, McKenzie argued. "Possession of Iranian soil would be a significant factor in future negotiations with Iran."

National security analysts agree that the US military can capture the island, but doing so would create more military and diplomatic problems — and many more American casualties.

"An invasion of Kharg would be fraught with danger, no matter what kind of forces are used. An amphibious landing would include a good deal of immediate support in the form of naval fire and aviation. But that also means there would be a flotilla of ships parked well within range of Iranian missiles and drones based on the mainland," said Dan Grazier of the Stimson Center. "The American ground forces would be under constant threat from the same Iranian assets."

Harrison Mann, a former US Army major and Defense Intelligence Agency official who now works at the progressive group Win Without War, says McKenzie's reasoning is divorced from reality. "He's imagining that if the US takes an Iranian island, it becomes a bargaining chip. That idea is predicated on the assumption that taking an island is less costly for the US than for Iran. Putting

a bunch of US troops on an island next to Iran becomes a casualty-generating machine."

It took until the last day of Carter's presidency, with the help of Algerian intermediaries and a deal to unfreeze nearly \$8 billion in Iranian assets, to free the 52 remaining captives. Carter had been, Ghazvinian wrote, seemingly prepared to stake his entire presidency on his ability to get them released. Through it all, he avoided war even as his political career imploded.

We might contrast Carter's attitude with that of Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, who never miss an opportunity to remind us of their toughness and willingness to use massive violence to bend Iran to their will. Their delusions are no match for geography.

"The parallel with today is that neither Brzezinski nor Carter — nor anyone in the administration — understood the ayatollah's psychology, let alone the blood and martyrdom that suffused Shiite fundamentalist ideology. They kept misreading Khomeini's resolve," Luce tells RS. "Seizing Kharg Island, as Brzezinski kept urging, and Trump keeps being tempted to do (he has repeatedly raised it in several phone calls with me), would not be the Hail Mary of their dreams. The continuity here is in US misreading of Iran."

Trump has threatened to destroy Iran's power plants and other civilian infrastructure nine times, only to step back from the precipice while blustering about imminent deals to restore peace and commerce. Any prudent minds left in Trump's inner circle might take a cue from Carter and tell him to avoid Kharg Island at all costs.

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National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (standing) briefs former US president Jimmy Carter (sitting) on the situation in Iran on January 4, 1980.

● FLICKR

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Iranian tanker docks at the platform of the oil facility in the Kharg Island, on the shore of the Persian Gulf. The island was responsible for 90% of Iran’s oil exports before the US-Israeli war that started on February 28, 2026.

● ATTA KENARE/AFP

Trouble with Persia? Ask the Romans



By John Limbert
US embassy staffer held captive in Iran, 1979-1981

OPINION

Donald Trump is far from the first foreign ruler to come to grief after launching an ill-advised military operation against Iran. At least four Roman triumvirs and emperors, driven by hubris and ignorance, launched military attacks on Persia that ended in disaster. In each failure, there are lessons for our own time.

Crassus: a prop in a Greek tragedy

In 53 BCE, Roman Triumvir and real estate magnate Marcus Licinius Crassus launched a campaign against the Parthians in search of military glory to match that of his fellow triumvirs, Caesar and Pompey. According to Plutarch's account, Crassus ignored the counsel of his Armenian ally King Artavasdes, who advised him to send his forces from Syria into Parthia via a northern route through Armenia, where mountainous terrain would favor Roman infantry. Crassus, whose only military experience was suppressing a slave revolt, convinced himself he was a military genius on a level with his fellow triumvirs. He ignored Artavasdes' advice and led his legions directly east across the North Syrian plains. At the famous battle of Carrhae (modern Harran in southern Turkey), the Parthians caught Crassus' army in the open, and their mounted archers, equipped with stirrups and with an effective supply chain of arrows, destroyed seven Roman legions. In Plutarch's account, the Parthians killed Crassus, and a messenger took his head to the Persian king, who was visiting the Armenian capital to celebrate a marriage alliance between his son and King Artavasdes' sister. There it became a prop in a performance of Euripides' drama The Bacchae.

Marc Antony: beaten by general winter

Seventeen years later, in 36 BCE, another triumvir, Marc Antony, sought both military glory and revenge for Carrhae when he led an expedition against Parthia. King Artavasdes of Armenia, having once more switched sides, supported Antony's advance through his territory into the Persian province of Media Atropatene (today's Iranian Azerbaijan). But Antony's army lost its baggage train to Parthian attacks, leaving it with limited supplies. After an indecisive attack on the provincial center of Praaspa (today's Maragheh, in northwestern Iran) the Romans were forced to make a disastrous winter retreat through the mountains of Azerbaijan and Armenia. In the end, Marc Antony had not only failed to take revenge for Carrhae, but his folly had also cost about 30,000 Roman lives.

A captured Valerian: And an unexpected national hero

Nearly 300 years later, in the early third century, the powerful Sassanian dynasty replaced the Parthians in Persia. Rome faced this strong rival at a time of internal chaos and civil wars — the so-called "crisis of the third century". As Rome endured frequent military rebellions and changes of emperor, the powerful kings Ardashir I (r. 224–242) and Shahpur I (r. 240–270) led the Persians. Syria, Armenia, and border towns such as Amida (today's Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey) became battlegrounds. By the middle of the century, a rising Persia and a weakened Rome were



fighting for control of Armenia, long ruled by the Parthians, bitter enemies of the Sassanians. Shahpur I first defeated Emperor Gordian in 244 and forced his successor, Philip the Arab (r. 244-249), to pay tribute and cede Armenia and Mesopotamia. Most memorably, in 260, Shahpur defeated a Roman army at Edessa (today's Urfa) and captured Emperor Valerian. The capture of a Roman emperor was a momentous event in the ancient world, and Shahpur wanted it properly commemorated. Numerous rock carvings on the Iranian plateau (see Naqsh-e Rostam) depict a mounted Shahpur triumphant over two defeated Romans: Valerian and Philip the Arab. During the recent fighting in Iran, the Islamic Republic revived this image to celebrate its "victories" over the US and Israel.

Julian: The myth of regime change

In the fourth century, the Romans repeated earlier mistakes by pursuing regime change in Persia. They backed an exiled Sassanian pretender, Prince Hormozd (known in Western sources as Hormisdas), a relative of King Shahpur II (r. 309–379). Hormozd had spent decades in Con-

stantinople, where he made influential friends and became fluent in Greek. He persuaded his Roman supporters and Emperor Julian (r. 360–363) that, if he returned to Persia with Roman military backing, resistance would collapse, Persian nobles would turn against Shahpur and welcome him as king. Despite unfavorable omens from sacrifices at Antioch, Julian launched his invasion in 363. According to the account of the Roman soldier and historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who accompanied Julian on his eastern operation, the campaign ended in disaster. The Persian cities remained loyal to Shahpur and closed their gates to Hormisdas. Rather than get bogged down in sieges, Julian continued to the Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon near present-day Baghdad. After inconclusive battles there, he retreated northward and was mortally wounded in a battle near Samarra. His successor, Jovian, continued the retreat north. But, blocked from crossing the Tigris into Roman territory, Jovian made a humiliating peace (a Memorandum of Understanding?) with the Persians. In return for an unhindered retreat, Jovian gave up Rome's interest in Armenia, withdrew from five provinces, and gave up

important border fortresses, including the strategic town of Nisibis (today's Nusaybin in southeastern Turkey).

Lessons to be learned

At least four Roman emperors met disaster in Persia and their fates should offer lessons for our times. Crassus met his doom because he ignored his ally, obsessed over the triumphs of his rivals, and imagined that his becoming rich by real estate speculation made him a military genius. Marc Antony ignored geography and underestimated his enemy. Valerian both underestimated the enemy and overestimated Roman military strength. Julian was misled when a Persian exile prince, who had lived abroad for decades and spoke fluent Greek, claimed that Persia would welcome him as a liberator. It may be too much to expect, but today can an Israeli leader who considers himself an expert on history and an American leader who considers himself a military genius apply those talents to avoid the mistakes of their Roman predecessors? So far, they have gone down the same paths with the same disastrous results.

The article first appeared on Responsible Statecraft.



This AI-generated image shows Naqsh-e Rostam, a carving immortalizing the capture of the arrogant Roman emperor Valerian, now altered to resemble US President Donald Trump. Trump once waged war against the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose flag has been added to the carving as well.

● ICANA



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US President Donald Trump stands at attention as a US Army carry team moves a flag-draped transfer case at Dover Air Force Base on March 7, 2026, in Dover, Delaware. Six soldiers from the 103rd Sustainment Command were killed in action by an Iranian drone strike on March 1 in Port Shuabia, Kuwait, during Operation Epic Fury.

● MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AP