

current circumstances rests less upon optimism regarding the behavior of the opposing side, and more upon the objective of preventing further costs and damages, transforming operational achievements into political achievements, and elucidating the Islamic Republic of Iran's narrative concerning developments.

Within this framework, diplomacy, in addition to its political function, performs an important role in persuading public opinion and preventing the formation of erroneous perceptions, particularly among neighboring countries, so that Iran's positions and responses to American actions may be elucidated for regional audiences within a clear and precise framework.

Some experts maintain that, in strategic calculations, timely decisions concerning the utilization of diplomatic capacity may diminish part of the operational achievements. What is your view?
Yes, one of the most important components of diplomacy is the management of time. Time performs a decisive role in di-

plomacy, and every intelligent strategy must remain conscious of, and sensitive to, the temporal element. If, at a juncture when negotiations should commence, delay occurs, part of the opportunities and achievements attained may be lost. Conversely, rashness and premature entry into negotiations may likewise prevent the complete utilization

of existing capacities. Therefore, neither delay nor haste is desirable. That which possesses importance is the identification of the appropriate moment for utilizing diplomacy; in such a manner that, in proportion to operational achievements, diplomatic capacities may be employed efficiently and effectively for

securing and consolidating national interests. In other words, the success of diplomacy depends, to a considerable extent, upon selecting the correct time for transforming the achievements of the field into political achievements.

The article first appeared in the Persian-language newspaper Iran.



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O P I N I O N

Much of the commentary on the war in Iran has focused on whether the mounting costs of Operation Epic Fury are worth it. The most common question I hear now, though, is how does this all end? The choice now before President Donald Trump may be to pick between the lesser of three unattractive options: a dramatic escalation, a conciliatory deescalation, and a continuation of today's messy stalemate.

The first approach would be to shoot our way out. Trump is reportedly giving this serious thought, having said earlier that he is considering a restart to sustained and high-intensity strikes akin to the start of Operation Epic Fury. In his own words, "[Iran hasn't] received enough pain yet." Or, as Secretary of State Marco Rubio put it recently, the United States could pursue a strategy of a "head for an eye".

The United States could strike Iranian critical infrastructure — including oil and gas facilities, power plants, critical transportation infrastructure, and desalination facilities — in the hopes of wreaking further havoc on the Iranian economy and society. But the cruel logic of this approach is obvious, and we have avoided it for good reason. Strikes of this nature could cause a humanitarian crisis in Iran, stain the United States' moral standing, and would by no means guarantee capitulation from Tehran. That is to say nothing of the Pandora's box that a "total war" might open, placing the Persian Gulf states' critical infrastructure, energy and power facilities, civilian population centers, as well as desalination plants at the top of Iran's target list.

Trump could also put boots on the ground, including to seize Kharg Island — which facilitates the lion's share of Iran's oil exports — and secure a strip of Iranian territory adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz to ensure safe passage for vessels transiting the



US Navy sailors prepare for flight operations on the flight deck of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in support of Operation Epic Fury on March 4, 2026.
● US NAVY

strait. But such operations would put thousands of US warfighters and prized naval assets at risk. The United States could also begin to re-target senior Iranian leaders. But Tehran has proved remarkably adept at replenishing itself, if not stiffening its resolve, in the wake of such strikes. As Ray Takeyh and Reuel Marc Gerecht aptly observed in a recent essay for the Wall Street Journal, "Tehran has a wartime advantage over Washington because the ruling Iranian elite wants to fight and has been willing to endure far more pain than Donald Trump."

That brings me to the second option that the president could consider: deescalation. In practice, this runs the risk of looking like capitulation. The United States could significantly scale back its military presence, declare victory (again) with respect to most of Operation Epic Fury's stated military objectives, and accept — at least to some degree — Iran's

grip on the Strait of Hormuz. The costs of the war are already high, and it's not clear whether the president or the American people have an appetite for such costs. Three US military service members were killed in Iran's recent attack on Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Azraq, Jordan, bringing the total to 18 service members killed and nearly 450 wounded. New polling shows 68 percent of Americans believe the Iran war was not "worth fighting". Then there are the strategic costs, namely a further and accelerated draw-down of munitions, which are already in short supply, and the repositioning of forces from priority theatres, such as the Indo-Pacific.

This option would be a hard sell politically. If the United States were to implement the provisions of the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding as written, Iran would remain in a position to continue to choke off the Strait of Hormuz at will — or at least charge a toll for passage while kicking down the road any real discussion of unresolved issues around its nuclear program. A unilateral deescalation would also shatter the confidence of our partners

in the region — not to mention partners elsewhere — in the United States as a trustworthy guarantor of security.

Suffice it to say that both the escalatory and deescalatory options before Trump are both unappealing. That is why he has understandably tried to chart a middle course: a tit-for-tat strategy of strikes and new deal offers playing out simultaneously in the military and diplomatic domains. But it remains to be seen whether this approach is likely to succeed on either front.

The costs mount every day, and the ultimate outcome is far from clear, but given the perils of a significantly more dovish or hawkish approach, the current conflict in the strait may become the new status quo.

The Strait of Hormuz is neither fully open nor closed. The ceasefire is punctuated by attacks almost daily, though it might be producing "shooting in a more moderate manner" to borrow

Small boats line the shore as cargo ships and other commercial vessels appear anchored in the Strait of Hormuz off Bandar Abbas, Iran, on July 27, 2026.
● RAZIEH POUDAT/ISNA

the president's own words. And the price of oil is high, though seemingly not crippling to the global economy, at least as of today. In the absence of a breakthrough on either the military or diplomatic front, this state of affairs is calcifying.

So, how long could this all last? The astrophysicist J. Richard Gott offered an infamous rule of thumb: absent better information, the odds are even that a phenomenon will endure at least as long as it already has. By that grim arithmetic, the five-month-old stalemate in the strait stands an even chance of grinding on through the end of this year. And every month it continues, its odds of surviving the next only improve.

If you don't find that logic persuasive, there are always the prediction markets. Expectations there put a 50 percent chance on commercial vessel traffic in the Strait of Hormuz "returning to normal" (a proxy for the end of conflict) by the end of 2026 — basically aligning the wisdom of crowds with a Princeton astrophysicist. Go figure.

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