



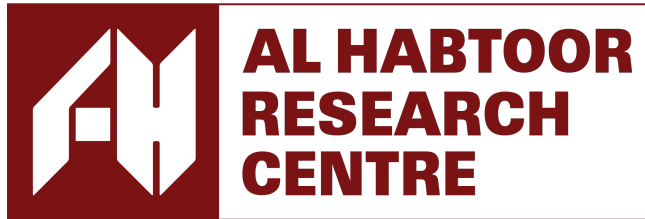
PART FOUR

From Enrichment to Deterrence

Are the Rules of Negotiation
over Iran's Nuclear Programme
Changing?

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ANALYTICAL SERIES

Negotiation Deadlocks: How Washington and Tehran Navigate the Tug-of-War Across Every Issue?

This analytical series examines the deep transformations unfolding behind the scenes of US–Iran negotiations, using the "Sixty-Day Agreement" as its point of departure to unpack some of the most complex and contentious files. Rather than merely offering a conventional narrative of events, this analysis probes the strategic roots of the crisis to examine how these disputes are reshaping the global balance of power. Tracing the network of actors and key influencers across both the domestic and external arenas reveals the hidden mechanisms of confrontation and negotiation that drive the strategic game. In doing so, it seeks to anticipate the potentially decisive consequences of the technical negotiations currently underway in Switzerland. These consequences are likely to shape the contours of regional and international security in the period ahead.

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The Memorandum of Understanding did not constitute a comprehensive or definitive settlement of the nuclear issue. Rather, it served as a temporary truce to freeze military strikes and maritime and nuclear threats, buying time to negotiate a comprehensive agreement that would address the enrichment crisis at its roots. These developments come in the wake of the collapse of the 2015 nuclear agreement following the United States' withdrawal in 2018, which gave Tehran considerable room to expand uranium enrichment, restrict international inspections and accumulate large quantities of uranium enriched to levels approaching those required for the production of a nuclear weapon.

Against this backdrop, the nuclear programme stands out as the Iranian leadership's principal bargaining chip. Although Tehran does not currently possess a nuclear weapon, it has accumulated the technical expertise, established the necessary infrastructure and secured the enriched uranium needed to produce one within a relatively short period should the political decision be taken to do so. This reality underscores that Iran's leverage at the negotiating table is no longer merely theoretical. It is tangible leverage, rooted in Tehran's ability to move rapidly towards weaponisation.

On the operational front, despite US and Israeli strikes targeting nuclear facilities inside Iran, assessments have confirmed only limited damage. Tehran is still strongly believed to retain substantial capacity to continue uranium enrichment. However, experts remain divided over the true extent to which the attacks have set back its nuclear programme. These assessments indicate that military action alone has failed to resolve the nuclear issue, naturally increasing the likelihood of an eventual resumption of negotiations and a return to the diplomatic track.

Against this complex backdrop, a fundamental question remains: will the terms governing the nuclear issue be revised in any future memorandum, or will they remain unchanged from those set out in the "Islamabad Memorandum"? If the parties move towards introducing new amendments, how far can each side go in making concessions to negotiate an end to this chapter?





First: Beyond the Iranian Mindset: The Parallel Deterrence Syndrome

An examination of Iran's approach to the nuclear issue over more than four decades of cumulative sanctions since 1979 reveals the regime's adherence to what might be described as a doctrine of resilience in the face of economic collapse. At its core lies a deeply held conviction among the ruling elite that bearing economic losses, even when they severely affect living standards, remains less damaging than abandoning the nuclear programme, which represents both a fundamental pillar of national security and a source of legitimacy for the ruling regime.

Since the 1980s, the Iranian economy has faced successive waves of Western and international sanctions, including the freezing of billions of dollars in assets and stringent restrictions on oil exports and the banking sector. These measures have resulted in chronic inflation, at times ranging between 40% and 50%, and repeated collapses in the value of the national currency, eroding citizens' purchasing power. Yet despite these immense pressures, Tehran has neither halted investment in key nuclear facilities such as Natanz, Fordow, Arak and Isfahan, nor retreated from developing its enrichment capabilities. This persistence stems from the regime's conviction that retreat would be existential: domestically, it would be interpreted as a victory for forces hostile to the revolution; externally, as submission to the will of its adversaries.

This Iranian doctrine rests on a complex web of interlocking political and ideological factors. First is the legacy of the eight-year war with Iraq, which entrenched a culture of enduring hardship in the name of preserving the regime. Second is the experience of the revolutionary elite, historically shaped by the belief that retreat under external pressure opens the door to a contagion of internal collapse. Third is the deeply rooted conviction that sanctions, however severe, can be overcome through smuggling networks, trade with Russia and Asian countries, and unconventional financial channels.

In the Iranian calculus, the equation is therefore clear: the economy can be gradually rebuilt, whereas relinquishing the nuclear programme would make it politically and technically impossible to restore under stringent international oversight. Accordingly, decision-makers treat signs of deteriorating living conditions, such as rising unemployment, the emigration of skilled professionals and the expansion of the shadow economy, as an anticipated cost of a long-term struggle to consolidate Iran's deterrent standing. To this end, the regime employs measures such as subsidies for essential goods and the expansion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' economic networks, reinforced by rhetoric denouncing "arrogance" and domination, to turn hardship from a source of vulnerability into an instrument of popular mobilisation under the banner of defending Iran's nuclear rights.

As Iran's nuclear programme has gradually shifted from a focus on peaceful nuclear energy towards attaining nuclear threshold status, namely, possessing the technical capability to produce a nuclear weapon within a short period without formally declaring it, the programme has assumed a fundamentally different place in the regime's strategic thinking, becoming an existential insurance policy. The leadership has come to regard this capability, even if latent, as the ultimate safeguard against scenarios involving the forcible overthrow of the regime or a prolonged siege culminating in its collapse. This shift has crystallised as a result of three principal factors:

First, the Iraqi and Libyan experiences: In the Iranian reading, the dismantling of weapons of mass destruction programmes in these two countries left their regimes exposed to Western military power and ultimately led to their downfall. This interpretation underpins an implicit principle: "A regime without a strategic deterrent capability becomes vulnerable to forcible regime change or to a siege that leads to its collapse."

Second, the decline or weakening of the influence of some regional allies: Allies such as the Syrian regime have endured decades of war and isolation, weakening the Iranian regime's traditional network of safeguards and increasing its reliance on its own deterrent capabilities, foremost among them its missile capabilities and latent nuclear capacity.

Third, the growing Western and regional discourse on changing Iran's behaviour or regime: The widening range of pressure tactics, including sanctions, diplomatic isolation, cyberattacks and acts of internal sabotage at nuclear facilities, has led the ruling elite to regard reaching the nuclear threshold, while preserving a margin of deniability, as a safeguard that raises the cost of any military action against Iran to strategically unacceptable levels. Within this approach, the debate among the Iranian elite is no longer about whether Iran needs a nuclear programme, but rather how to manage it in a way that maximises deterrence while minimising direct provocation that could trigger full-scale military action. This explains Tehran's determination to maintain uranium enrichment at high levels, up to 60%, while continuing to insist officially that its programme is peaceful and reaffirming its commitment to the principle of not producing nuclear weapons based on fatwas issued by the elder Khamenei, all while retaining the indicators that attest to Iran's capabilities as a nuclear threshold state.

As the international debate has shifted from preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear technology to preventing it from acquiring a nuclear weapon, a set of red lines has begun to crystallise within the Iranian regime. Defined by the Supreme Leader and sovereign state institutions, these red lines translate into firm negotiating positions in every round of talks with the West.

At their core is the principle that Iran may accept temporary, time-bound, or technical restrictions, but will reject any measure that could be interpreted domestically as relinquishing a sovereign right or that would permanently constrain its ability to return to high-level enrichment in the future.

Among the most prominent of these red lines are:

- Rejecting a complete halt to uranium enrichment. Iranian negotiators may accept reductions in enrichment levels or stockpile quantities. Still, they will not accept a complete cessation of enrichment or turning Iran into a country dependent on imported nuclear fuel. In the Iranian calculus, this would mean losing nuclear expertise and autonomy in decision-making in a highly sensitive domain, running counter to the revolution's emphasis on scientific and technological independence.
- Rejecting the large-scale removal from Iran of highly enriched material, such as uranium enriched to 60%, where this would deprive the country of the ability to return rapidly to nuclear threshold status. Within Iran's sovereign calculus, this is regarded as a direct infringement on nuclear sovereignty because it would shift the centre of gravity from inside the country to external actors, leaving Iran's deterrent capability dependent on the goodwill of the major powers and the International Atomic Energy Agency. This is viewed as a strategic mistake that cannot be repeated.
- Rejecting any inspection mechanisms that treat Iran as a permanent exceptional case outside the rules of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Iran continues to demand recognition of its full right to peaceful nuclear activities under Article IV of the Treaty, while requiring security guarantees for its nuclear infrastructure and personnel as a precondition for any expanded cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In this context, directives attributed to the Supreme Leader, whether under Ali Khamenei or in discussions of Mojtaba Khamenei's role as a nucleus of religious and political decision-making within the Supreme Leader's household, are rooted in a jurisprudential-security framework that regards relinquishing the highly enriched uranium stockpile or accepting humiliating inspection conditions as a form of forfeiting future generations' right to retain the capability to defend the regime. This outlook feeds the parallel deterrence syndrome: the insistence on maintaining multiple layers of deterrence, including latent nuclear capability, missile capabilities, regional proxies and cyber capabilities, and the belief that any encroachment on one of these layers constitutes a structural threat to the regime's future.

In this context, the parallel deterrence syndrome best describes Iran's strategic mindset today. The nuclear programme is not viewed in isolation from the rest of the country's power architecture, but as part of an interconnected network of deterrent instruments: an advanced ballistic missile programme, a network of regional allies and proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, cyber capabilities, and economic and energy-related instruments such as control over oil supplies and the Strait of Hormuz.

The central premise is that Iran seeks to create a strategic environment in which the costs of any comprehensive strike against it or any attempt to overthrow the regime would outweigh the anticipated gains. It does so by dispersing sources of risk across multiple theatres and maintaining a diverse range of retaliatory options. In this context, the nuclear programme is not merely an instrument of deterrence, but a symbolic centre of gravity that binds these instruments together and confers legitimacy upon them. Missiles, regional allies and cyber capabilities are thus presented as instruments for safeguarding Iran's sovereign nuclear right against "arrogance".

This syndrome makes any negotiations with Iran more complex. A concession on one issue, such as reducing the stockpile of uranium enriched to 60%, is interpreted domestically as weakening the deterrence architecture as a whole, raising fears that pressure on other fronts would follow. The regime therefore tends towards carefully calibrated trade-offs, accepting losses in one area in exchange for gains in another, without allowing any encroachment on the core of the equation: retaining a latent nuclear deterrent capability alongside parallel non-nuclear instruments that support this capability and complicate its adversaries' calculations.

Accordingly, Tehran views the issue not only through the lens of the damage inflicted on its nuclear facilities, but also as a test of the parallel deterrence syndrome: to what extent can the nuclear programme, backed by regional proxies and threats in the Strait of Hormuz, compel Washington and its allies to recognise a minimum set of Iranian red lines, foremost among them preserving the highly enriched uranium stockpile and preventing Iran from being reduced to a state of permanent nuclear disarmament?



Second: The Operational and Technical Reality: The Mystery of the Missing Uranium

The mystery of the missing uranium now represents the most perplexing intelligence challenge facing the United States and Israel. Concern is no longer confined to enrichment levels, but has expanded to uncertainty over where this sensitive stockpile is stored. Some reports indicate that Tehran has moved critical portions of its enriched uranium stockpile, particularly uranium enriched to 60%, to secret, heavily fortified facilities deep inside mountains, such as Mount Pickaxe (Koleng Gaz La), to serve as strategic hideouts or alternative enrichment sites.

This intelligence gap has widened as a result of two parallel developments: **first**, Iran's policy of nuclear opacity, culminating in the suspension of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the withholding of routine data and restrictions on inspectors' access; and **second**, the expansion of deeply buried facilities that are difficult to destroy with conventional weapons without incurring enormous military and political costs. These transfers are not merely a precautionary measure intended to exploit the protection afforded by immense layers of rock. Rather, they constitute a deliberate tactic to create intelligence uncertainty among Iran's adversaries, ensuring that any military plan to strike the nuclear programme remains incomplete and vulnerable to failure. The concealed stockpile thus becomes a deliberate pillar of Iran's "parallel deterrence" architecture, allowing Tehran to maintain a fortified reserve beyond monitoring and direct targeting while preserving a margin of political deniability before the international community.

This complex operational reality has cast a long shadow over the future of inspection mechanisms and potential military options, making both considerably more complex and difficult. In terms of international monitoring, concealing the stockpile has eroded the effectiveness of the comprehensive inspection regime under the Additional Protocol, enabling Iran to conduct parallel nuclear activities beyond inspectors' reach by exploiting reporting gaps, periods of suspended cooperation, and hybrid military-nuclear facilities that are difficult to classify. This has further deepened the crisis of confidence. As questions about the missing stockpile have intensified, Tehran has increasingly accused the Agency of being beholden to the major powers. It has demanded security guarantees for its facilities and personnel before offering any transparency.

On the military front, this geographical dispersal and deep fortification have forced planners in Washington and Tel Aviv to abandon the notion of a single decisive strike and instead move toward hybrid scenarios.

Such scenarios would require repeated strikes with no guarantee of success, greater reliance on sabotage and cyber operations to disrupt supply chains and control systems from within, and, in parallel, intensified economic and political pressure to push Tehran towards renewed negotiations that would bring its stockpile back under international monitoring. Ultimately, this tactic has shifted the challenge from a debate over the stockpile's size to one centred on its location and the nature of its protection, adding an unprecedented layer of complexity to any future military or diplomatic course.

• **Enrichment Levels Before the War**

On the eve of what has become known as the Twelve-Day War, Tehran had consolidated its effective transition from developing its nuclear programme to positioning itself as a nuclear threshold state. This shift meant possessing all the technical and material capabilities, as well as the human expertise, required to produce a nuclear weapon within a short period should the political decision be taken to do so. This progress was evident across three principal areas: the accumulation of enriched uranium, the attainment of advanced enrichment levels and the expansion of its network of advanced centrifuges. According to reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency and other specialised bodies, Iran had built up a diversified stockpile of uranium enriched to varying levels, including 20% and 60%, levels approaching the 90% threshold associated with weapons-grade uranium.

Uranium Enrichment Levels in Iran's Stockpile

Uranium Quantities in Kilograms

Enrichment Level %	Enriched Uranium Quantity	Approximate Uranium-235 Quantity	Technical Classification
60	441	265	Highly enriched uranium
20	184	37	At the threshold of highly enriched uranium
5	6,024	301	Low-enriched uranium
2	2,391	48	Low-enriched uranium

Table: Al Habtoor Research centre • Source: Reuters • Created with Datawrapper

Western estimates indicate that Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 60% would, following further enrichment, be sufficient to produce between three and five nuclear weapons, supporting its classification as a state on the threshold of weaponisation. This development has not been quantitative alone.

It has also been accompanied by qualitative advances, including an increase in the number of earlier-generation centrifuges (IR-1 and IR-2m), the introduction of more advanced models (such as the IR-4 and IR-6) at key facilities including Natanz and Fordow, and the redistribution of the stockpile across multiple sites. These measures have reduced Iran's nuclear breakout time from a year or more during the nuclear agreement period to weeks or less.

More importantly, Iran has achieved near-complete mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle, from extracting uranium ore, through converting it into yellowcake and uranium hexafluoride gas, to high-level enrichment, supported by human expertise and well-established supply networks. This accumulated knowledge has made military strikes against physical infrastructure less consequential over the long term, as the capacity to rebuild remains intact so long as the technical knowledge itself is not completely destroyed.

- **Implications of the Strikes on Natanz and Isfahan**

In response to this rapid progress, Western countries sought to impede Iran's nuclear trajectory through military strikes, cyber sabotage and covert operations targeting key facilities to disrupt power supplies or destroy centrifuges. However, a technical assessment of these attacks, including those targeting the Natanz and Isfahan facilities, indicates they slowed the programme rather than breaking it.

The Natanz facility, which lies at the heart of Iran's enrichment operations, sustained damage described as extensive, affecting numerous centrifuges. Yet each time, Tehran moved swiftly to bring parts of the facility back into operation and equip it with more advanced machinery. It also expanded activities at other facilities, such as Fordow, to reduce dependence on a single site that could be more easily detected.

The same applies to the Isfahan facility, which is involved in uranium conversion and research activities. Iran has mitigated the impact of strikes by exploiting the complex mountainous terrain and dispersing activities across alternative sites. Consequently, the damage has remained limited in practical terms when measured against the declared strategic objective of depriving Iran of its capabilities as a nuclear threshold state, as none of these attacks has resulted in a prolonged shutdown of the programme.

Tehran has skilfully leveraged these attacks to reinforce its deterrence doctrine. Domestically, it has used them to bolster its narrative of resilience and demonstrate its ability to absorb strikes and rebuild. Externally, it has used them to convey that the military option will not be sufficient to break its nuclear resolve, and that any attempt to replicate the scenarios seen in Iraq and Syria would face a geographical environment and infrastructure that are exceptionally complex and heavily fortified.

- **The Mystery of the Missing Uranium and Fortified Facilities**

This reality has created an exceptionally complex intelligence challenge for the West, centred not only on enrichment levels but also on the location of the highly enriched uranium stockpile, creating an intelligence gap known as the "mystery of the missing uranium". While the International Atomic Energy Agency monitors activities at declared facilities, analyses suggest that Iran has transferred critical portions of its uranium enriched to 60% to secret hideouts and fortified facilities deep inside mountains.

This intelligence gap has deepened as a result of two principal factors: **first**, Tehran's policy of nuclear opacity, which culminated in the suspension of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the withholding of periodic stockpile data and restrictions on inspectors' access to facilities; and **second**, recurring reports that Tehran has been using heavily fortified mountain facilities, such as Mount Pickaxe, as strategic hideouts for sensitive material or alternative enrichment sites. This approach embodies the concept of "fortified nuclear depth", making such facilities virtually impossible to destroy with conventional weapons without incurring enormous military and political costs.

Transferring uranium to these sites serves three parallel strategic objectives: protecting the stockpile from direct strikes through extensive rock fortifications and deep underground tunnels; creating intelligence uncertainty that prevents adversaries from accurately assessing the size of the stockpile and devising a decisive military plan to destroy it in its entirety; and using its concealment to reinforce the parallel deterrence doctrine by integrating the nuclear stockpile into a complex network encompassing ballistic missiles, cyber capabilities and regional proxies. In this way, the missing uranium becomes a calculated instrument of deterrence, leaving Tehran with a concealed reserve beyond the reach of inspections and military strikes while preserving a margin of political deniability.

- **Growing Complexity of Future Inspections and Strikes**

These developments, including the concealment of the highly enriched uranium stockpile and the suspension of international cooperation, cast a long shadow over the future of inspection mechanisms and potential military options, making both considerably more complex. In terms of inspections, this situation has undermined the effectiveness of the comprehensive inspection regime based on the Additional Protocol, enabling Iran to conduct parallel nuclear activities beyond oversight by exploiting periods of opacity and gaps in monitoring. This trajectory has also deepened the crisis of confidence between Tehran and the International Atomic Energy Agency. As demands for transparency over the missing uranium have intensified, Iran has responded by accusing the Agency of being beholden to the major powers and insisting on prior security guarantees for the protection of its facilities and personnel.

On the military front, the geographical dispersal and deep fortification of the stockpile have compelled military planners in Washington and Tel Aviv to reassess the viability of what is known as the "single knockout strike", pushing them towards hybrid scenarios and tactics. These alternatives include repeated strikes despite the recognised risk that they may fail to achieve a decisive outcome; an increasing emphasis on sabotage and cyber operations to disrupt supply chains and control systems from within rather than through external bombardment; and attempts to combine military action with economic and political pressure to push Iran towards a settlement that would bring the missing stockpile back under international monitoring.

This landscape demonstrates that the mystery of the missing uranium is not merely a journalistic label. Rather, it captures a critical phase in which Tehran has shifted the focus from the stockpile's size to its location and the nature of its fortification, adding new layers of complexity to any future diplomatic or military course.



Third: Beyond the American Mindset: Trump's Two-Front Battle

The current US approach to Iran's nuclear programme extends beyond conventional diplomatic calculations, constituting what might be described as a two-front battle waged by President Donald Trump. On the domestic front, Trump is engaged in a fierce political battle against the legacy of his predecessor, Barack Obama, and the previous nuclear agreement, seeking to demonstrate that his maximum-pressure strategy is the only path capable of changing Tehran's behaviour and denying it a nuclear weapon. In this context, he aspires to forge a new agreement bearing his own name, one that would go down as a historic strategic shift in US policy towards countries he describes as "rogue states".

On the external front, Trump is engaged in a complex confrontation with Iran itself, but one constrained by parameters set by US national security considerations, the timing of electoral contests and persistent Israeli pressure. Through this confrontation, he seeks to push Tehran to the brink of accepting an agreement tantamount to surrender on his terms, while avoiding a full-scale regional war whose outcome cannot be guaranteed, and using each escalation to strengthen his domestic political position. In the American mindset, the Iranian nuclear issue therefore intersects with three central and inseparable spheres: settling political scores with Obama, electoral competition, and the close strategic alliance with Israel. Together, these three spheres define the boundaries of what is possible and impossible in any US approach.

- **The Obama Factor and the 2015 Deal**

Donald Trump's political calculus does not view the 2015 nuclear agreement as merely a technical arrangement between negotiating teams. Rather, it sees the deal as a potent symbol of Barack Obama's legacy that must be erased from the record of US foreign policy. This has been clearly reflected in Trump's repeated descriptions of the agreement as "the worst deal ever negotiated by the United States" and a disastrous accord, arguing that it gave Iran cover to continue its programme while rewarding it with billions of dollars, including the release of \$1.7 billion in frozen Iranian assets. This fixation on Obama reflects a personal and political desire to close the door entirely on engagement and compromise, replacing it with a policy of maximum pressure that denies adversaries any room for manoeuvre or opportunity to preserve previous gains.

Alongside this, Trump seeks to engineer a new agreement that would amount to Iranian capitulation, requiring Tehran to reduce enrichment to zero, dismantle its sensitive infrastructure, including reactors and advanced centrifuges, and accept extended restrictions that would constrain Iran for generations, allowing him to proclaim an unprecedented diplomatic victory. Washington's withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and the reimposition of sanctions also sent a message to the domestic audience, demonstrating the Republican president's ability to restore US prestige and reject what he regarded as gratuitous concessions by the previous administration. The nuclear issue has thus become as much an arena for settling domestic political scores as it is a geopolitical confrontation.

- **The Electoral Clock and the 2026 Congressional Midterms**

US policy towards Iran is closely tied to the perpetual electoral clock, with every president, particularly within a deeply polarised political system, seeking a major foreign policy achievement to present to voters and the party base. This factor matters even more for Trump as the 2026 congressional midterms approach, with Republicans and Democrats locked in a high-stakes struggle for control of both chambers of Congress, making the president's image on national security issues a potentially decisive political asset. From this perspective, Trump uses the Iran issue as a platform to project strength and resolve to his base, underscoring his refusal to tolerate adversaries that threaten Washington's allies and Israel's security, while portraying himself as the leader correcting the mistakes of Democrats who allowed Iran to expand its regional influence.

The issue also serves as a bargaining chip in domestic politics, with any progress in negotiations or calibrated escalation presented as evidence of the Republicans' ability to force Iran to its knees, alongside warnings that a Democratic return to power would revive an approach of leniency. Negotiations following the latest war are therefore viewed not solely through the prism of security, but also in terms of the electoral gains they could deliver in 2026. This helps explain the US administration's deliberate adoption of maximalist negotiating demands, such as zero enrichment and complete dismantlement, since these demands themselves project strength to the domestic audience, even if achieving them in practice remains virtually impossible.

- **Israeli Pressure and the Setting of a Hard-Line Threshold**

The US approach towards Iran cannot be understood without recognising the weight of the Israeli factor in shaping policy, particularly within Republican administrations closely aligned with pro-Israel lobbying groups. For Israel, Iran's nuclear programme is not merely a technical challenge, but an existential threat that constrains its military options and disrupts the balance of power once Iran reaches nuclear threshold status.

Israel's uncompromising position rests on three pillars. First, it categorically rejects any settlement that preserves Iran's "nuclear know-how" or enrichment infrastructure, even under time-bound restrictions, based on the belief that the programme could be rapidly revived in the future. Second, it insists on comprehensive dismantlement, including the heavy-water pathway and restrictions on advanced centrifuges. This position often goes beyond Washington's own demands, pushing the United States towards a harder line to avoid appearing lenient towards the security concerns of its closest ally. Third, Israel continues to press for a strategy of integrated pressure combining sanctions, cyber and covert operations, and the threat of military action, to prevent Tehran from fortifying its capabilities in mountainous areas or developing ballistic missile systems.

This Israeli pressure converges with Trump's own approach, reinforcing an uncompromising posture and weakening American voices advocating a realistic agreement. As a result, the US administration is compelled to adopt exceptionally high negotiating thresholds for fear of Israeli accusations that it is repeating the mistakes of the previous agreement. The negotiating process thus ultimately becomes a three-dimensional dynamic involving Washington, Tehran and Tel Aviv.



Fourth: The Negotiating Impasse and the Failure of the Islamabad Memorandum

The latest round of negotiations between the United States and Iran, which culminated in the Islamabad Memorandum, represents an exceptionally complex juncture that exposes a deep structural crisis in managing the conflict between the two sides. This experience has demonstrated that attempts to forge interim understandings under the pressure of military escalation often collide with the reality of intertwined and contentious strategic issues, leaving any agreement vulnerable to rapid collapse unless it rests on clear foundations and mutual trust.

This negotiating impasse has extended beyond the technical dispute over enrichment levels to broader geopolitical bargaining that links the nuclear programme to freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. As both Washington and Tehran resorted to negotiating under fire to impose their respective terms, contradictions deepened, and significant legal and political gaps emerged in the memorandum's provisions. This ultimately ended the interim process and returned the confrontation to a cycle of threats and confrontation.

- **The Fragility of Interim Agreements and the Ambiguity of the Islamabad Memorandum**

The Islamabad Memorandum did not constitute a comprehensive or final agreement. Rather, it was conceived as an interim diplomatic framework designed to halt military operations and open a sixty-day negotiating window to address two highly sensitive and complex issues: the nuclear programme and security in the Strait of Hormuz. This provisional character left the memorandum highly vulnerable to tensions from the outset. It sought to address issues of existential importance to both sides. Yet, its key provisions were couched in broad legal terms and lacked precision, leaving considerable room for divergent interpretations between the two capitals.

The published text of the memorandum contained fourteen provisions, including an immediate cessation of hostilities, the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and the establishment of a joint mechanism to address nuclear stockpiles under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, paving the way for a comprehensive settlement.

The principal difficulty, however, arose from the provision concerning security in the Strait and commercial shipping, which stipulated that Iran would use its best efforts to ensure the safe passage of vessels without charge for sixty days. The wording lacked robust enforcement mechanisms or clearly defined penalties for non-compliance. Tehran consequently interpreted the provision as a conditional commitment, contingent on compliance by the other parties and progress on the remaining issues. In contrast, Washington treated it as an unequivocal and binding undertaking, independent of the course of negotiations.

The legal ambiguity was not confined to maritime security. It also extended to the provision governing the nuclear stockpile. The text referred to a joint mechanism for managing existing stockpiles without precisely specifying the enrichment levels concerned, the quantities to be addressed or the destination of the material in the event of a reduction in enrichment levels, let alone setting out a clear framework for practical monitoring.

This drafting gap allowed Washington to interpret the provision as a first step towards removing most of the highly enriched uranium from Iranian territory or placing it under stringent monitoring. Tehran, by contrast, regarded it as an initial US acknowledgement that the solution should remain within Iran's borders, with enrichment levels reduced domestically rather than the material being exported. The Islamabad Memorandum was therefore burdened from its inception by major strategic issues and profound legal gaps, making its collapse inevitable once the parties began testing the limits of its practical implementation in an already highly charged environment.

- **The Interlinkage Between the Nuclear Issue and Navigation in the Strait of Hormuz**

The Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery through which approximately one-third of the world's seaborne oil trade passes, has evolved in Iranian strategic thinking from a temporary instrument of tactical pressure into something akin to a "golden weapon". Tehran has demonstrated a notable willingness to risk further rounds of escalation over this waterway, to the extent that it now ranks above the nuclear programme itself in Iran's calculations, despite the decades of severe sanctions it has endured over the latter. This paramount strategic importance was clear during the Islamabad negotiations and in the memorandum's wording, which closely linked reopening the Strait to discussions on other issues, foremost among them the nuclear programme.

Analyses and reporting examining the reasons for the collapse of the negotiations indicate that the dispute was not confined to nuclear details, but centred on two interrelated issues: the reopening of the Strait and the fate of the sensitive stockpile of approximately 900 pounds of highly enriched uranium, alongside Iran's insistence on its economic demands, including the release of nearly \$27 billion in frozen oil revenues. This reality has produced a new negotiating equation in which security in the Strait is no longer an isolated issue, but a central pillar of any comprehensive settlement. Tehran has explicitly linked its flexibility over nuclear concessions to securing international recognition of its dominant role in the Strait and of the conditions it sets for maritime traffic.

Washington, by contrast, regards securing the Strait and keeping it free from threats or charges as a strategic objective in its own right, given its direct implications for the stability of energy markets and the security of US allies in the Gulf, Europe and Asia. Tehran, meanwhile, regards retaining its ability to influence the Strait, whether through its military presence, the threat of escalation or sovereign measures, as an integral part of its parallel deterrence architecture, shielding it from the imposition of onerous nuclear terms.

This deep interlinkage has made any negotiation over the nuclear issue inevitably a negotiation over the Strait, and vice versa, thereby weakening the architecture of interim agreements such as the Islamabad Memorandum. While Washington accuses Tehran of intransigence and refusing to relinquish its highly enriched uranium, and Iran counters by accusing the United States of making impossible demands, one reality stands clear. In both countries' strategic calculations, security in the Strait cannot be disentangled from the nuclear deterrence equation.

- **The Strategy of Negotiating Under Fire Between Washington and Tehran**

In the aftermath of the February 2026 war, a defining feature emerged in both sides' conduct: adopting a strategy of "negotiating under fire". This strategy operates along two simultaneous tracks, combining intensive diplomatic engagement, exemplified by marathon negotiations in Islamabad that lasted twenty-one hours and produced interim texts, with the continuation of military operations and intermittent strikes, or the threat of their resumption.

On the US side, this strategy involved continuing limited military strikes against Iranian targets or other targets linked to its regional proxies, while using the naval blockade and the extensive military presence around Iran and on the territory of its allies as continuing instruments of pressure, even while negotiating sessions were under way. At the same time, the US leadership presented what it described as a final and flexible offer. However, at its core it contained stringent conditions, including unequivocal guarantees renouncing nuclear weapons, detailed arrangements for disposing of the highly enriched uranium stockpile, and security guarantees concerning the Strait. Washington quickly blamed Tehran for the failure, arguing that it had rejected these conditions.

Tehran, for its part, countered this strategy with a parallel approach. It leveraged its regional proxies in nearby theatres, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, to exert pressure that would raise the cost of any US escalation and send a warning that war would not remain confined to Iranian territory should Washington cross Iran's nuclear or sovereign red lines. Alongside this, Iran skilfully manoeuvred over the transfer of uranium. Leaks indicated that Tehran was prepared to reduce enrichment levels for civilian purposes, provided that this took place within a sovereign framework that ruled out transferring the material abroad or relinquishing its right to return to high-level enrichment in the future, a proposal that Washington firmly rejected.

These reciprocal tactics turned the negotiating process into a daily arena for testing resolve. However, the widening gap between the two sides' negotiating thresholds on both the nuclear and maritime issues prevented the interim memorandum from holding, leading to its rapid collapse and bringing the language of threats back to the fore.

- **Why Did the Islamabad Memorandum Fail?**

Although the Islamabad Memorandum sought temporary stability by halting attacks and strikes, it addressed only the surface manifestations of deeper problems and introduced no fundamental change from the previous situation regarding the nuclear issue.

Although Iran is not currently enriching uranium as a result of the damage inflicted on its programme during the war, albeit limited, the memorandum does not provide for the removal of its substantial stockpile of highly enriched uranium. Instead, it only allows for the possibility of reducing Iran's enrichment level, subject to monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Nor did it establish clear monitoring mechanisms to prevent manipulation of its provisions or the resumption of enrichment within Iran. The memorandum was therefore fragile in its drafting and superficial in its treatment of issues that could again lead to the outbreak of war, foremost among them the Strait of Hormuz and the nuclear programme.

The central problem concerns the fate of the highly enriched uranium stockpile, the extent to which its enrichment level would be reduced, and the precise nature of the monitoring role the International Atomic Energy Agency would undertake. Some observers have expressed concern that negotiations over the nuclear issue could continue along this trajectory, with enrichment levels merely reduced and the nuclear programme frozen for several years, offering only a temporary solution. In return, sanctions could be lifted, reconstruction funds made available and restrictions on Iranian oil exports removed, potentially providing Iran with rapid cash flows that could help it rebuild its missile capabilities and support its regional proxies.

A close reading of analyses of the collapse of the Islamabad negotiations reveals structural factors that ultimately brought down this interim framework. Foremost among them was the nature of the US demands, which Tehran regarded as excessive and impossible to meet. Washington insisted on arrangements that would, in practice, entail either transferring the critical portion of Iran's highly enriched uranium stockpile out of the country or freezing it under international control in a manner that would deprive Tehran of control over it. These demands were accompanied by stringent conditions that would eliminate Iran's ability to use the Strait of Hormuz as leverage in the future.

Conversely, Iran's insistence on securing a comprehensive package of gains and linking the various issues together further complicated the negotiating landscape. Tehran sought not only to secure recognition of its right to enrichment and to manage its stockpile domestically, but also the release of its frozen oil assets, the gradual lifting of the naval blockade, and the withdrawal of US forces from the region within a specified timeframe. This expansion of demands effectively transformed the interim memorandum into something resembling a miniature final agreement, which Washington refused to accept within such a limited timeframe.

Compounding these difficulties was a deep and entrenched crisis of trust between the two capitals. While Tehran regards the United States as lacking credibility because of its previous withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, Washington fears that Iran could exploit any legal loophole or delay in monitoring to continue developing its programme and consolidate its dominance over the Strait. These mutual suspicions turned the memorandum's ambiguous formulations into flashpoints for disagreement and tension rather than spaces for diplomatic flexibility.

Finally, the Israeli factor played a decisive role in pushing the US administration toward a harder line, diminishing Washington's willingness to make concessions that Tel Aviv could interpret as a repetition of the previous agreement's mistakes. Ultimately, the failure of the Islamabad Memorandum demonstrated that the impasse extends beyond flaws in drafting. It reflects a fundamental incompatibility between one side fighting to preserve its deterrent instruments and another that rejects their legitimacy and seeks to dismantle them, making any interim memorandum negotiated under the pressure of war inherently vulnerable to inevitable collapse.

Against the backdrop of this continuing open-ended confrontation and a deepening crisis of confidence, the future of Iran's nuclear programme is taking shape far removed from scenarios of dismantlement or rollback. Successive rounds of escalation and repeated military strikes have demonstrated their strategic limitations in erasing the accumulated "nuclear know-how" of Iranian personnel or destroying the heavily fortified infrastructure dispersed deep inside mountains.

Continued military confrontation will therefore not eradicate the programme. Rather, it will drive the Iranian leadership towards greater intransigence and an even firmer commitment to nuclear threshold status as a non-negotiable existential insurance policy. This further entrenches the nuclear programme as a technical and operational reality resistant to eradication through conventional military force alone.

In any future talks, the diplomatic landscape will confront new rules of the game and a different balance of power. Future negotiations will no longer revolve around denying Iran nuclear technology. Still, they will move into the more complex territory of how to "contain" a state that already possesses all the capabilities required to produce a nuclear weapon should the political decision be taken to do so. Tehran will enter any new negotiating process with more stringent red lines, categorically rejecting the dismantlement of its infrastructure or the surrender of the keys to its nuclear sovereignty to external actors. Its flexibility, if any, will therefore be confined to negotiating within specific margins, such as enrichment levels and the implementation of international monitoring mechanisms conditional on security guarantees.

Faced with this transformation, Washington and its allies will confront two extremely difficult choices: either maintain prohibitive negotiating thresholds, such as demanding "zero enrichment", effectively killing any diplomatic process at its inception and leaving the door open to continued conflict and protracted regional tensions, or acknowledge Iran's new nuclear reality and pursue a realistic settlement. Any such settlement can succeed only if it is framed within a rigorous and tightly constructed legal framework that closes all loopholes, provides reciprocal sovereign and economic guarantees, and establishes a comprehensive regional security architecture that no longer allows strategic issues to be compartmentalised or addressed through interim solutions.

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