



Capt Daniel Keeler, the commanding officer of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, as he prepares to fly an MH-60R Sea Hawk helicopter in the Indian Ocean

If Trump sends the US in to Iran, don't expect it to be a short sharp shock

● With at least 10 warships in the area, the US could flatten Tehran. But what then?



Barry O'Halloran

Making exaggerated threats in the hope of forcing a negotiated settlement is an integral part of Donald Trump's deal-making tactics. His supposed skill in this sort of bare-knuckle negotiation was forged in the heat of the New York property market.

Less than a month ago, he performed his customary routine in the case of Venezuela. On that occasion, he acted on his threats, and had Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro snatched from his palace in Caracas and delivered to the less salubrious quarters of a New York prison.

On the face of it, the case for Trump delivering on his threats to the regime in Iran is even more compelling.

“The US can pull the trigger, but it will not live with the consequences – we will

Although a question mark always hangs over the his more outrageous statements, the evidence seems to indicate that the US is more likely than not to mount a major air and naval assault on Iran – and to do so sooner rather than later.

On Wednesday, writing on social media, Trump urged Iran's leaders to “negotiate a fair and equitable deal”. He warned them that “a massive armada is heading to Iran” and that “time is running out” for a deal.

“As I told Iran once before” he continued, “MAKE A DEAL! They didn't, and there was ‘Operation Midnight Hammer,’ a major destruction of Iran.”

He was referring to the Israeli and US airstrikes on Iranian targets during a 12-day war last June.

“The next attack will be far worse! Don't make that happen again.”

By Thursday, Trump was setting some conditions. Before negotiations can even begin, Washington has demanded a permanent end to Iran's uranium enrichment programme; new limits on its ballistic missile development; and an end to its support for proxy forces in the Middle East.

All these have been repeatedly rejected by Ayatollah Khamenei for more than a decade.

The ayatollah and his inner circle now face a stark choice. If they fail to accept the conditions, then an overwhelming force of US naval and air power could reduce much of the regime's means of repression to dust. If Khamenei were to act rationally, he would take the deal. However, driven by an extreme Islamist ideology, the 86-year-old leader has never been disposed to act rationally in the past, and he is unlikely to do so now.

At the moment, all that stands between this threat of Iranian armageddon is a very thin line of communication between Trump's special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, and Iranian foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi.

There are at least 10 US warships positioned near Iran. Over the past 10 days, they have also moved aircraft, drones, and air-defence systems to the region. After what happened during the 12-day war last June, Iran should be under no illusion that Trump will not be afraid to use them.

In a move to counter the American threat, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps navy has announced that a two-day live-fire exercise will take place in the Strait of Hormuz this weekend, the principal aim of which is to disrupt international shipping.

The strait is the world's most vital oil export route, connecting the largest Gulf producers – such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates – with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

This massive build-up of US military forces, combined with the almost certain participation of the Israeli air force, means that an attack on Iran will not be a short, sharp “one-and-done” operation like Venezuela. US sources have told CNN that the options being discussed by Trump's aides include a much larger strike intended to have a lasting impact.

Mohanad Hage Ali of the Carnegie Middle East Centre said the scale of US deployments suggest planning has shifted from a single strike to a much more sustained offensive. In that case, the attack would last many days, possibly weeks, and would obviously

have dramatic impacts on the region. As one Gulf Arab source put it: “The United States may pull the trigger, but it will not live with the consequences. We will.”

Ali Shamkhani, a senior adviser to Khamenei in Iran, acknowledged that a “limited strike is an illusion”. He also warned that any US military action would be met with a harsh response, including strikes on Tel Aviv.

Apart from putting an end to the Iranian nuclear threat once and for all, Trump may also have regime change in mind. He previously said his goal in Iran was simple: “winning” – something he has failed to define.

One possibility is that he wants to use US military superiority to level the playing field between street and state in Iran, and clip the wings of the regime's capacity to repress its own people.

Trump had threatened an attack over Iran's deadly crackdown on mass anti-regime protests last month. Estimates of the total number of people killed range into the tens of thousands. He demanded an end to the multiple executions and the shooting dead of protesters.

However, the killing of unarmed protesters was not confined to the streets. There are reports from medical staff in multiple hospitals that protesters being treated for gunshot wounds were murdered in their hospital beds by regime militia.

One can argue that Trump's concern for the plight of the oppressed people of Iran is solely one of political self-interest, but he has highlighted their grotesque treatment at the hands of Iran's theocratic dictatorship.

This is in sharp contrast to leftist political parties, including in Ireland, which have been vociferous about Gaza for three years and yet remain strangely silent on the massacre of unarmed civilians in Iran.

For the left, it would seem that the mass killing of Muslim civilians is not so much a moral issue as a political calculation, which depends on who is doing the killing.