

The Easy Way or the Hard Way: Washington's Three-Part Pressure on Tehran

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Words, ships and money, and the decision now in Tehran's hands

On Saturday, President Trump told reporters he has “a decision to make” on Iran. “It’ll either be the easy way or the hard way,” he said. In the same remarks he claimed Iran is “virtually giving up any plans of a nuclear weapon.” His defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, said all options remain on the table.

Presidential warnings are easy to dismiss. This one should be read alongside what Washington is doing at sea and in the markets. Together they make up a three-part campaign of pressure. Each part is public, and each carries a clear message for Tehran.

Part one: the words

The phrase “the easy way or the hard way” sounds crude, but it describes a strategy. It offers Tehran two paths, and it says which one Washington prefers without ruling out the other. The claim that Iran is “virtually giving up” its nuclear plans is the easy path, said aloud before Iran has taken it. It is part statement and part invitation: here is the story we are prepared to tell if you let us tell it.

Hegseth’s “all options” line is the other half. Together the two statements mark out the space Iran’s leadership is being asked to choose within.

Part two: the ships

The words come with movement. A US official told the Associated Press on Thursday that roughly 9,000 troops are on their way to the Middle East aboard a group of ships. The group includes the USS Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group, which would be the third aircraft carrier in the region, and the USS Makin Island amphibious group carrying about 2,000 Marines. Three carriers could be in the region as early as the end of October. Axios reported an unannounced meeting of the president’s national security team at Camp David on Iran and Yemen.

Carriers are the most visible message in the American arsenal. They are expensive to move and hard to hide, and that is the point. A third carrier on its way tells Tehran that the “hard way” is not a figure of speech. It also tells friends in the region, Israel first among them, that Washington means to stay.

Part three: the money

The third part is quieter and may matter most. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told The Axios Show, in an interview published on Saturday: “For the first time in history, since they started pumping oil, they will have no oil on the water this week. They will have no revenues.” He described a sequence of military action, a naval blockade and now an economic isolation campaign he called Operation Economic Outcast.

The effect shows up on the street. Reuters reported on Saturday that the rial had fallen again, to about 2.69 million to the dollar on the free market. The currency has lost more than half its value in the past year, and the central bank says it is injecting up to \$2 billion to support it.

A regime that cannot sell its oil cannot easily pay its security forces, fund its proxies or calm its own cities. Military pressure threatens the regime's capabilities. Economic pressure eats away at its foundations. Used together, they shrink the time Tehran has to stall.

The regional backdrop

The neighbourhood is not quiet. On Saturday the Houthis' military spokesman claimed a missile and drone attack on a Saudi Aramco facility in Riyadh. Witnesses told Reuters and AFP they saw fire and smoke at the refinery south of the capital, though Saudi authorities have not confirmed an attack. Early on Sunday, Yemen's government-aligned forces said they were striking "vital targets" in Sanaa and Saada.

Whatever the full story in Riyadh turns out to be, the pattern is familiar. When the centre is under pressure, the edges flare up. That is one reason the Camp David meeting reportedly covered Yemen as well as Iran.

What it means for Israel

For Israel the alignment is plain. The United States is applying the kind of pressure Jerusalem has long argued for: credible force, economic strangulation and a clear demand. Israel does not need to say much this week, and it should not.

There is also reason for caution. Pressure campaigns end in one of two ways. Either the other side gives in on terms both can describe as victory, or someone decides that the hard way has become the only way. The president has said he has a decision to make. He has not said he has made it, and nobody outside the room should pretend to know what it will be.

The responsible posture is to watch actions rather than adjectives. Watch where the carriers go. Watch whether Iranian crude moves. Watch whether Tehran's public language softens or hardens. None of that will be settled in a weekend.

A closing thought

There is an old Jewish instinct about moments like this. Pharaoh was given the easy way more than once. Each time the pressure eased, his heart hardened again. The Torah does not record that as a lesson in American foreign policy. It records it as a lesson about rulers who mistake a respite for a reprieve.

We do not know how Tehran will choose. We do know that the choice is being put to it more clearly than at any time in years, in words, in ships and in money. "The king's heart is in the hand of the L-rd, like streams of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Proverbs 21:1). That applies to kings in Washington and in Tehran alike.

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