

US military asks troops for ‘creative and unconventional’ ideas to punish Iran

The request from a senior officer at the US military command carrying out President Donald Trump’s war with Iran came in an email: We need ideas.

“We are looking for new creative and unconventional ways to pressure and punish Iran,” an officer in US Central Command’s intelligence branch wrote in a message sent Wednesday to a broad group of military analysts, according to a source familiar with the message. A second source also said that a senior US military officer sent the message last week soliciting new ideas for how to deal with Iran.

The crowdsourcing-style query, which military officials said was unusual over email, is one sign of the limited — and potentially unpalatable — options available to Trump to force Iran into a deal on his terms. Hoping to find an alternative, the official at CENTCOM kicked off the brainstorming session via email to see if anyone had a better idea. The second source said CENTCOM is looking at everything, acknowledging it needs to reevaluate the strategy.

“U.S. Central Command has a long history of thinking and working in innovative ways,” Capt. Timothy Hawkins, a spokesperson for CENTCOM, said in a statement. “Admiral Cooper, in particular, reaches out to members of our great team, regardless of rank, to achieve the highest levels of operational performance possible.”

The email preceded Trump’s threat to launch new strikes against Iran, only to call them off over the weekend after regional officials — namely Saudi Arabia’s crown prince — intervened by calling the president and urging him to de-escalate.

For weeks, the US has hammered Iran with air strikes designed to degrade its ability to threaten shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and to bring Tehran back to the negotiating table, but there’s still no sign of a deal.



Smoke rises following explosion at an unknown location, during what CENTCOM says are strikes on Iran, in this screengrab taken from a handout video released on July 29, 2026.
U.S. Central Command/Handout/Reuters

Trump has been [weighing intensifying the military campaign](#), potentially by relaunching intense strikes on Iran's remaining nuclear facilities, which he claimed had been "obliterated" in strikes last summer. Two sources familiar with the planning say the military has been actively preparing to launch strikes on [Pickaxe Mountain](#) and other Iranian sites believed to contain either nuclear material or equipment.

But even with America's most powerful conventional weapons, those sources say, missiles and bombs alone are unlikely to achieve much because the facilities are buried deeply underground. To destroy them, the US would likely need to use ground troops — a tremendous risk that Trump has been unwilling to take — amid questions about his administration's transparency over service member casualties. [Eighteen US service members](#) have been killed in the fighting so far.

Trump has been considering strikes akin to a "fireworks" display, another source said, which could hit either the same or similar sites as those targeted a year ago, in the hopes of a symbolic victory that would allow him to exit the war without actually accomplishing one of his initial aims: ridding Iran of its nuclear program.

And it's unlikely that would resolve what has become the war's central issue: Iranian claims over the Strait of Hormuz.



A man sits on a surfboard as a container ship and other commercial vessels appear anchored in the Strait of Hormuz off Bandar Abbas, Iran, on July 27, 2026.
Razieh Poudat/ISNA/AP

“At the end of the day, POTUS will want a deal, so he’ll continually look for ways to get tough and get out of this,” said one of the sources familiar with recent planning discussions.

“You need creative minds at times — especially if you’re running out of conventional options.”

Both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency have recently assessed that the kind of bombing the US is carrying out is unlikely to shift the Iranian negotiating position, [CNN has reported](#).

The president’s most senior military adviser, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine, has acknowledged publicly that bombing alone is unlikely to accomplish all Trump’s previously stated objectives for the war.

“Air power has its limits,” Caine told lawmakers last month.

Options for escalating the conflict have been presented to Trump for months and debated at length, and more military assets have flowed to the region in anticipation of a go-ahead from the president. One plan conceived by CENTCOM would involve heavy bombardment over the course of one or two weeks to take out Iran’s missile capabilities, US officials said.



An F/A-18E Super Hornet launches off the flight deck of the USS George HW Bush, in the US 5th Fleet area of operations, which includes the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, on July 15, 2026. US Navy

Trump has so far held off, in part after hearing [concerns from Caine](#) about dwindling supplies of air defense interceptors. Other officials have also raised worries about the risks of high civilian casualties if Trump followed through on threats to strike infrastructure sites like bridges and water desalination plants.

Trump could escalate by putting American boots on the ground, a threat he's made repeatedly as he's talked about occupying the strategic [Kharg Island](#) or removing Iran's [highly enriched uranium](#). But that would further break a key promise he made to his MAGA base: "I will not send you to fight and die in stupid foreign wars that never ends," he said during a 2024 campaign rally in Pennsylvania.

Or he could accept a dangerous status quo: endless rounds of strikes and counterstrikes with Iran that are likely to cost further American lives and leave the Strait of Hormuz in a state of constant peril that could resemble the "forever wars" he has criticized.

"I think we just want to win," Trump said during a Cabinet meeting Friday when asked about concluding the war. "We'll be hitting them very hard, and you know, at some point, they're going to say, 'We just can't take it anymore.'"