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Trump Says He Left Instructions to ‘Obliterate’ Iran if It Assassинаtes Him

The president made the comment during a visit from Israel’s prime minister, and he signed an executive order to intensify a campaign intended to persuade Iran to give up its nuclear program.

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It is not clear what form President Trump’s pressure campaign might take. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times



By [David E. Sanger](#)

David E. Sanger has covered six presidencies, and for more than two decades has reported extensively on the state of the Iranian nuclear program.

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President Trump said on Tuesday that he had “left instructions” for Iran to be “obliterated” if its assassins killed him, on the day that he signed an executive order restoring his “maximum pressure” campaign against Tehran.

Mr. Trump’s comments came in response to a reporter’s question, but the issue was more than hypothetical: Just after Mr. Trump was elected, the Justice Department indicted several men who it said had been heard plotting to kill Mr. Trump in September. One of the plotters said that he was assigned in September to carry out the plan by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Iran’s elite military unit, prosecutors said in court papers.

“If they did that, they would be obliterated,” Mr. Trump said on Tuesday. “That would be the end. I’ve left instructions. If they do it, they get obliterated. There won’t be anything left.”

He added, “Biden should have said that, but he never did.”

In fact, experts say, a president cannot leave instructions for military action after his death. That decision would have to be made by his successor, who would then be commander in chief.

The issue came up as Mr. Trump, who has said he is willing to revive negotiations with Iran, signed an executive order whose details were not immediately released by the White House. As a result, it is not clear what form the pressure campaign might take. But Mr. Trump professed to be hesitant to sign it.

“So this is one I’m torn about,” he told reporters. “Everyone wants me to sign it. I’ll do that.” But he said he was “unhappy to do it.”

“We have to be strong and firm,” he added, “and I hope that it’s not going to have to be used in any great measure at all.”

At a news conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel on Tuesday evening, he invited Iran to negotiate a new deal to dismantle the nuclear infrastructure it has rebuilt in recent years. But any agreement would most likely go beyond that, limiting Iran’s provision of money and aid to groups like Hezbollah and Hamas.

Mr. Trump said at the news conference that “we will once again enforce the most aggressive possible sanctions to drive Iranian oil exports to zero and diminish the regime’s capacity to fund terror throughout the region and through the world.” He claimed that when he was in office, “Iran was not able to sell oil.” That was an exaggeration: Iran’s oil exports in 2020 dropped to about 350,000 barrels per day, down dramatically from 2.5 million barrels a day. Some of that decline was the result of shutdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is far from clear that a new pressure campaign will work: Mr. Trump also tried maximum pressure in 2018, after he withdrew the United States from the nuclear accord that Iran had struck with the

Obama administration three years earlier. Mr. Trump still claims that was a major victory, but most outside analysts say it backfired. European powers never went along with it, and eventually Iran pulled out of the accord and has since built a capability to race for a bomb.

In recent years, Iran has resumed enriching uranium on a large scale, work that was largely prohibited, except in small amounts, under the 2015 agreement. And by the estimate of nuclear inspectors and outside experts, it now has produced enough uranium, enriched just short of bomb grade, to make four or more weapons.

In an executive order on Tuesday, Mr. Trump called for cutting off oil shipments from Iran, much of them headed to China. The Chinese refused to go along with U.S.-led sanctions, and Mr. Trump has accused former President Joseph R. Biden Jr. of looking the other way while Iran found ways around existing sanctions.

But Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu see an opportunity.

In the view of American and Israeli officials, Iran has never been weaker than it is today. Hamas and Hezbollah, which Tehran has funded and armed, have lost their leadership and their ability to strike Israel. Syria’s leader, Bashar al-Assad, has fled to Moscow, and his country is no longer an easy, covert route to supply the militant groups with Iranian weapons.

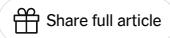
In October, an Israeli counterstrike on Iran took out the missile defenses around Tehran and some of the nuclear facilities. It also struck the giant mixing devices that make fuel for new missiles, crippling Iranian production. The result is that the residential and office compounds for Iranian leadership would be essentially unprotected in an Israeli strike, and the number of missiles they would have to retaliate would be limited to what has already been manufactured.

Mr. Trump has indicated that he is in no hurry to get into a direct conflict with Iran, and he seems open to a negotiation. When asked just after his inauguration whether he would support an Israeli strike on the facilities, he said: “Hopefully that can be worked out without having to worry about it. It would really be nice if that could be worked out without having to go that further step.” Iran, he hoped, will “make a deal.”

Iran’s president, Masoud Pezeshkian, who entered office in July after his predecessor was killed in a helicopter crash, has repeatedly said that he, too, would like to negotiate a new arrangement.

David E. Sanger covers the Trump administration and a range of national security issues. He has been a Times journalist for more than four decades and has written four books on foreign policy and national security challenges. [More about David E. Sanger](#)

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