

U.S. Military Options in Iran: Means in Search of an End

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Brief Analysis

Military strikes, stringent sanctions enforcement, and help for the opposition could sharpen the multiple crises that may eventually prove the regime's undoing.

On January 2, President Trump responded to the nationwide protests in Iran by [warning \(https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/115824439366264186\)](#) that the United States would “rescue” the protesters if the regime “violently kills” them. Since then, thousands have been killed, thousands more have been wounded, and many more have been detained, spurring the United States to send a carrier strike group, several squadrons of strike aircraft, and missile defense batteries to the region. President Trump now faces a dilemma: having threatened action, if he does not act (or acts ineffectively), then American credibility will suffer, emboldening Iran and undermining U.S. deterrence beyond the region.

U.S. Ends and Means

Since his initial warning, President Trump has [stated \(https://www.politico.com/news/2026/01/17/trump-to-politico-its-time-to-look-for-new-leadership-in-iran-00735528\)](#), “It’s time to look for new leadership in Iran,” while also [urging \(https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115972658725010644\)](#) the regime to negotiate a new nuclear deal. Meanwhile, he has reportedly asked his generals for “[decisive \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/trump-iran-military-options-b49429c4\)](#)” military options.

Conventional wisdom says the president prefers swift, targeted strikes, similar to those he ordered last year against Islamic State cells in several countries and against Iran’s nuclear program. But he also ordered a fifty-two-day air campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, as well as a months-long pressure campaign against Venezuela that culminated in the removal of President Nicolas Maduro. Thus, the administration might opt for an offshore pressure campaign to facilitate a managed transition in Iran, or launch strikes to decapitate or collapse the regime and degrade its military and security forces.

For President Trump, eliminating Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei after capturing Maduro would further burnish his tough-guy image. Khamenei is the regime’s linchpin; removing him (whether through a diplomatic deal or military strike) could pave the way for an agreement with his successors. Alternatively, such action could mire the regime in a prolonged succession crisis or messy power struggle among contending factions within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, providing an opportunity for separatist elements in the country’s peripheral regions to assert themselves. Another possible option is decapitation strikes against the crop of IRGC leaders who replaced those killed last summer, which could convey to their successors the potential costs of continued support for the regime.

At the same time, Washington might consider enhanced enforcement of sanctions by diverting tankers or striking Iran’s small number of oil export terminals along the country’s southern coastline, which could greatly curtail the regime’s oil income and incentivize some senior IRGC officers who benefited from sanctions-busting to reconsider their support for the regime. This, however, would cross a red line for the country’s leaders, who have repeatedly declared that if Iran cannot export oil, then no one else will be allowed to export oil from the Gulf either. In this scenario, Tehran would almost certainly order attacks on critical infrastructure in the Gulf as it did in 2019, when it targeted the world’s largest oil processing facility at Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia, after Washington tried to further curtail its oil exports via sanctions.

The United States could also strike the national and regional headquarters of the regime’s security forces (e.g., the Law Enforcement Command, Basij, and IRGC Provincial Corps), and use cyber or kinetic means to hit critical elements of the Iranian surveillance state and repressive apparatus, such as closed-circuit television monitoring centers and the regime’s demographic and biometric databases. Yet the security forces have hundreds of thousands of members dispersed around the country, many operating in their home neighborhoods, so strikes on headquarters would likely have only a limited impact on field operations.

In addition, military strikes might target:

- air defenses, to ensure that the regime and its security forces remain vulnerable to air attack, perhaps inducing Tehran to act with greater caution going forward;
- the missile and drone array, which could limit the regime’s ability to retaliate militarily (though this arsenal is so large that a significant residual capability would likely survive);
- naval forces belonging to the IRGC and Artesh, reducing Tehran’s ability to disrupt oil shipments in the Gulf and beyond (though even a small residual force could prove highly disruptive); and
- nuclear research and development facilities like [Taleghan 2 \(https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/imagery-update-concrete-sarcophagus-at-taleghan-2-nears-completion\)](#), which Iran has been rebuilding after its destruction by Israel in October 2024.

Cracks in the Regime?

Military defections will be a necessary factor for just about any kind of regime transition or change in Iran. However, it is difficult to see elements of the IRGC’s leadership acting against Khamenei, since that could alienate the [estimated 20 percent \(https://mei.edu/commentary/irans-coming-reckoning-regime-collapse-is-likely-democracy-is-not/\)](#) of the population who are committed supporters of the Islamic Republic, in addition to the [perhaps 80 percent \(https://gamaan.org/2025/08/20/analytical-report-on-iranians-political-preferences-in-2024/\)](#) of Iranians who are believed to oppose the regime and who almost certainly do not want to be ruled by a military junta—never mind one with bloodstained hands.

Moreover, an IRGC-led junta could be even more difficult for Washington to deal with than Khamenei’s regime, and would no doubt continue to rule through repression. The IRGC’s leadership has often shown itself to be more ideologically rigid than the Supreme Leader; for instance, then-IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari [opposed \(https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/commodities/iran-revolutionary-guards-oppose-un-resolution-on-nuclear-deal-idUSL5N1002DB/\)](#) the 2015 nuclear deal. Likewise, IRGC officers were willing to die in large numbers during Syria’s civil war, with at least [seventeen generals \(https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/iranian-military-developments-and-trends/\)](#) killed in action there—demonstrating their commitment to the regime’s culture of jihad, martyrdom, and resistance despite Khamenei’s [despondency \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-casualties-syria-and-strategic-logic-intervention\)](#) when IRGC losses in Syria peaked in late 2015. An unfettered IRGC

leadership might also double down on “resistance” by trying to go for a nuclear weapon, come what may.

Conversely, widespread corruption in the IRGC may have made some officers susceptible to recruitment by foreign intelligence services, as suggested by the fact that Israel’s Mossad **killed Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/01/world/middleeast/how-hamas-leader-haniyeh-killed-iran-bomb.html>) at an IRGC guesthouse in Tehran in July 2024, among other intelligence feats that required penetration of the IRGC. Yet while surprising twists are possible, it is difficult to imagine that with so much blood on their hands, IRGC members would defect to the opposition in large numbers. And without such defections, the opposition will remain outgunned.

Iran’s Response Options

Tehran has generally responded in kind and more or less proportionately to threats and challenges, seeking to impose costs while avoiding escalation. For example, when the Trump administration sought to halt Iran’s oil exports in May 2019, the regime responded with the aforementioned attacks on oil infrastructure and shipping in the Gulf. Yet if Tehran believes it is facing an imminent threat to its survival, it will presumably respond much more forcefully, or even take preemptive action. Indeed, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi **warned** (https://www.wsj.com/opinion/irans-regime-defends-its-crackdown-46a2f59a?gaa_at=eafs&gaa_n=AWETsqdaoJp17Fj6Qir_MoNp3eoHN3DOVsoRo7j_Um0NwnjIW6P7deHEuovkGFqIcj8%3D&gaa_ts=69781f1a&gaa_sig=23BUIRimQtYS0H2zGgaTBvsLqz32XAC4-9xqBzbOjY-BwD7chN_5Q5k35KDP2smQYF6cN3evgDrLNPKOMSAcw%3D%3D) last week that Iran will be “firing back with everything we have if we come under renewed attack,” and that such a war will “drag on far, far longer” than its enemies anticipate.

If its grip on power is not immediately threatened, however, there is reason to believe the regime will largely adhere to an amped-up version of its traditional “resistance” playbook if attacked. This means avoiding escalation and a prolonged conflict with an enemy that enjoys major military overmatch and escalation superiority—while perhaps withholding advance notice of retaliatory strikes and pushing back harder than in previous exchanges.

Other reasons for Iran to avoid massive retaliation at this time stem from the status of its military arsenal. In a war, Iran will need salvos of hundreds of drones and missiles to overwhelm U.S. defenses (and Israeli defenses if the latter participates). Yet its drone and missile production facilities will likely be targeted in an attack and might take some time to rebuild. Moreover, Iran may lack the number of missile launchers needed for such large salvos due to losses during last summer’s war. Husbanding these assets for potential future rounds of conflict will therefore be essential.

Furthermore, Tehran’s reliance on the Strait of Hormuz as its economic lifeline will likely preclude any efforts to block it except in extremis. Instead, Iran can be expected to continue its current policy of “**smart control** (<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/49995/Our-strategy-is-smart-control-of-Hormuz-Strait-IRGC-chief>),” responding to enhanced sanctions enforcement by selectively diverting tankers and, if deemed necessary, conducting limited strikes against onshore oil installations, all toward the goal of imposing costs while avoiding devastating strikes against its own oil industry. However, even limited disruptions to Gulf oil exports would raise tensions between Washington and many of its Gulf partners, who are liable to blame the United States for any regional instability deriving from a strike on Iran.

As for Iran’s regional proxies, it is unclear what role they might play in responding to U.S. strikes, or whether they would sit out the fighting as they did last summer. At any rate, the Houthis are the only such proxy with the capacity to achieve strategically consequential effects—namely, by **restricting freedom of navigation** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019>) through the Red Sea.

Policy Implications

President Trump has set expectations that may be hard to meet, and recent U.S. successes may obscure the challenges ahead. Strikes could alter political dynamics in Iran, perhaps convincing security personnel to reconsider their support for the regime while giving protests a second wind. But a lack of organization could prevent the opposition from capitalizing on this opportunity. Helping Iranians create such a framework is the most important thing the United States and its partners can do to build a better future for Iran.

At the very least, the goal of military strikes should be to leave the Islamic Republic more vulnerable, less capable, and less stable, thereby limiting its future options and perhaps causing it to act with greater caution in its dealings with the Iranian people, the United States, and America’s partners. Yet military strikes combined with more stringent sanctions enforcement could catalyze longer-term processes and confront the regime with multiple crises, forcing it to fight on several fronts as sources of income dry up and insoluble economic and environmental problems mount. By ripening the contradictions **driving the current unrest** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-endgame-protests-repression-and-trump-administration>) in the Islamic Republic—lack of regime legitimacy, diminished government capacity, and a broader, **more assertive** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-regime-has-already-lost-its-most-potent-weapon>) opposition—this kind of combined U.S. approach might set conditions for the regime’s eventual undoing.

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