

# What If the United States Doesn't Strike Iran?

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Brief Analysis

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**No matter what President Trump may say about potentially securing “a good deal” from Iran, refraining from military action after weeks of dire U.S. warnings would likely convince Tehran that it can strike fear in other governments.**

**A**longside important analyses of [strike options and potential consequences](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-military-options-iran-means-search-end) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-military-options-iran-means-search-end>) if the United States attacks Iran again, it is also worth pondering what implications would arise if there is no U.S. strike. This is all the more relevant amid sundry reports that the multilateral talks now set for Istanbul on February 6 may focus [solely on nuclear matters](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/03/world/middleeast/iran-president-talks-istanbul-witkoff-kushner.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/03/world/middleeast/iran-president-talks-istanbul-witkoff-kushner.html>) rather than the wide variety of other issues that are central to U.S. policy on Iran—from the human rights concerns that spurred President Trump’s military threats, to America’s longstanding security concerns about missile proliferation and regional destabilization.

Whatever happens, Trump’s past practice strongly suggests that he will claim success tied directly to his threats of using force. Yet the administration will face major challenges portraying whatever modest steps emerge from the new round of talks as a U.S. victory. The Iranian people, the regime’s leaders, and observers around the Middle East are likely to measure such claims against the perception that America’s true goal is the fall of the Islamic Republic, which is very unlikely to happen soon. U.S. officials should therefore expect widespread skepticism about whether Tehran—or, for that matter, Washington—will follow through on whatever nuclear agreement-in-principle is reached in the coming days.

## Fear of Iran’s Capabilities

**T**ehran has good reason to believe it can strike fear in other governments. Over the past month, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has stated that his country will not attack Iran at this time, and many other

governments in the region—including Egypt, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—have echoed Jerusalem in urging the United States not to strike now. Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates publicly ruled out the use of their airspace or territory for any offensive military action against Iran, unlike their public silence before last summer’s twelve-day war. (Washington did not use facilities in either country for that campaign, reportedly at their request.) The *New York Times* was spot on **[when it wrote \(https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/15/us/politics/trump-iran-israel-us.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/15/us/politics/trump-iran-israel-us.html)** that “Israeli and Arab officials fear Iran could retaliate by striking their countries.” In other words, if the United States opts not to attack, Tehran will be justified in concluding that its own military capabilities (especially its missiles) were an important factor in that decision.

Indeed, allied warnings about the dangers of another strike have fallen on receptive ears in Tehran. Contrary to U.S. perceptions, Iranian officials at all levels have proclaimed loudly and often that their retaliatory measures inflicted substantial damage during the twelve-day war. Although many of these proclamations are somewhat exaggerated, one of their central arguments is difficult to deny: namely, that Iran never asked for last year’s fighting to stop, and that halting the war was a decision made by the other side. Furthermore, they are correct in noting that Israel has never revealed the full extent of damage from Iranian missile strikes, in part to keep these details from Tehran. What Jerusalem has acknowledged is that two of those strikes alone—on the **[Weizmann Institute of Science \(https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/major-israeli-research-institute-loses-around-45-labs-to-iranian-missile-strike/4021733.article\)](https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/major-israeli-research-institute-loses-around-45-labs-to-iranian-missile-strike/4021733.article)** and the **[Haifa refinery \(https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/le511t25l\)](https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/le511t25l)**—cost hundreds of millions of dollars or more to remedy. In addition, Israeli homeowners **[reportedly filed claims of \\$1.5 billion \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/billions-in-damages-israel-rebuilds-after-iran-war-destruction-in-south-and-north/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/billions-in-damages-israel-rebuilds-after-iran-war-destruction-in-south-and-north/)** in damages from the June war.

Iran also appears to believe that its missile inventory is holding up better than U.S. and Israeli stocks of antimissile systems, though it has acknowledged extensive damage to its missile launchers. According to various privately disclosed Israeli analyses, Iran was estimated to have lost as much as 80 percent of its air defense systems at the time of last summer’s ceasefire and more than two-thirds of its launchers; these assessments also note that Israeli strikes knocked out significantly more missiles than Iran was able to fire. Crucially, however, the regime retained perhaps half of its stock of ballistic missiles capable of reaching Israel. Overall, many of its remaining missile stocks are short-range systems that are not suitable for hitting Israel, but they can reach targets in neighboring countries, including installations used by the United States. Iran is estimated to have made considerable progress on restoring production of long-range missiles, though its claims that production is higher than before the war are improbable.

On the other side of the ledger, the United States and its allies fired roughly 100-150 Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile interceptors during the war—a substantial figure given that the total global inventory of these munitions is 500-600 and annual production is generally quite slow (e.g., only 11 THAADs were produced in 2023). The Pentagon has also repeatedly warned that U.S. stocks of Patriot missiles are much lower than needed for defensive purposes in the current global threat environment. And although Israel has not released information about its antimissile inventory, estimates from reliable sources are that it is significantly smaller than before the war.

More broadly, allied warnings about Iran’s retaliatory capabilities—including from Israel—say much about how the region regards the current balance of power. Although Washington is rightly impressed by the manner in which Israel won the opening battle last June (e.g., killing many top Iranian military and nuclear officials; operating largely unimpeded over Iranian airspace), that is not the whole story. The region’s pleas to Washington show clear worries about what Iran could do in future rounds of fighting.

## **Disappointment Among the Iranian People**

ven after high-profile regime slaughters against protesters on January 8-9, President Trump urged Iranians to

**E** continue marching. On January 13, he posted, “Iranian patriots, keep on protesting—Take over your institutions. Help is on its way.” He also warned that those behind “the senseless killing...will pay a big price,” claiming, “The day of reckoning & retribution is coming.”

In light of such statements, it is hardly surprising that many Iranians who detest the regime—especially after the recent slaughters—not only hope but indeed expect the United States to attack. Nerves are on edge inside the Islamic Republic, as seen by the widespread rumors that a foreign attack was behind recent accidental explosions in various locations (now a common occurrence given the country’s mismanagement and deteriorating infrastructure). Speculation that the United States intends to kill Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is rampant as well, with regime sources shrilly warning about the dire consequences of any such attempt and popular voices expressing hope that this will happen.

If the United States takes no action after all these warnings, promises, and rumors, many in Iran will be deeply disgruntled. Some Western commentators may draw comparisons to 1991 (when Washington was perceived as encouraging Iraqis to overthrow Saddam Hussein) or 1956 (when U.S. officials indirectly urged Hungarians to resist the Soviet occupation), but the more vivid comparison for many Iranians would be 2009, when the United States did relatively little to encourage the mass protest movement sparked by the regime’s rigged presidential election. Even those civilians who are not much aware of the historical precedents will likely be disappointed and resentful that Trump’s words did not lead to action, while the regime will no doubt portray a U.S. stand-down as “proof” that Washington accepts the Islamic Republic’s deep roots.

## How Much Does This Matter?

**U.** S. discussions about what to do next should be informed by a realistic understanding of how decisionmakers in Iran and the rest of the Middle East view the results of America’s previous use of force. While Washington may read the twelve-day war as a complete disaster for Iran, the messaging from Israel and other governments suggests that they remain respectful of what Iran can do militarily.

Of course, this perceptual factor is only one of several elements that should inform a U.S. decision on military action—and not necessarily the most important element. For instance, if U.S. advisors do not believe a strike would accomplish much at this time, then it would be better to absorb the reputational costs of not attacking rather than suffer the potentially worse consequences of launching strikes that have little or no impact. If President Trump decides not to attack, his administration could limit the damage to U.S. military credibility by highlighting specific aspects of Iran’s continued vulnerability. It could also address the disappointment of the Iranian people by taking visible steps to support protesters (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-watershed-moment-case-meaningful-us-action>), such as stronger measures to help them communicate amid regime blackouts and crackdowns.

In many ways, the problems that could arise from not acting are the product of the Trump administration’s loud proclamations about whether and why it would act. The usual advice about such strikes is to keep quiet in advance while warning one’s adversary behind the scenes that an attack is imminent unless certain conditions are met. Yet that approach does not always appeal to U.S. politicians. When Trump wrote that, “Time is running out...The next attack will be far worse,” he was only the latest in a line of U.S. presidents who have issued bold public ultimatums to adversaries—most recently President Obama, who insisted in 2013 that Bashar al-Assad “must go” and warned in 2015 that Assad’s use of chemical weapons would “cross a red line.” Much as advisors and analysts may counsel against such an approach, U.S. politicians often ignore these precautions. The challenge now is to shape potential reactions to U.S. military inaction by explaining that Washington retains the upper hand while Iran is the party that remains vulnerable.

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