

The U.S. and Israel Strike Iran

by [Holly Dagnes \(/experts/holly-dagnes\)](#), [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#), [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#), [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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Brief Analysis

Read or watch urgent insights into America's objectives in Iran and the policies that would best advance U.S. security, help the Iranian people, and improve the prospects for long-term regional stability.

On March 2, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Holly Dagnes, Dennis Ross, Dana Stroul, and Robert Satloff. Dagnes is the Libitzky Family Senior Fellow in the Institute's Viterbi Program on Iran and U.S. Policy. Ross is the Institute's William Davidson Distinguished Fellow and a former senior U.S. government official on Iran issues. Stroul, the Institute's director of research and Kassen Senior Fellow, formerly served as deputy assistant secretary for the Middle East at the Pentagon. Satloff is the Institute's Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.

Holly Dagnes

The current mood on the ground in Iran is deeply shaped by the mass anti-regime protests that took place earlier this year, the brutal security crackdown that left tens of thousands of civilians dead, and the lingering uncertainty about the regime's future. When Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed by allied military strikes this weekend, courageous celebrations erupted across Iran. Yet it remains to be seen how that development will change the regime.

So far, officials have activated the procedures mandated by Article 111 of the constitution according to schedule—a three-member council consisting of the president, the judiciary chief, and a clerical member of the Guardian Council will take over the Supreme Leader's duties until a successor is chosen. If the United States and Israel do not target the clerical establishment more decisively, the Islamic Republic's security apparatus will remain strong and capable of suppressing any future uprisings. Indeed, many Iranians fear what they would face if the regime survives this round of conflict. Authorities have already executed 552 people this year alone, and even greater mass executions could follow the war depending on the regime's status when the fighting stops.

In the near term, it is worth watching for possible defections within Iran and abroad; these could even take the form of simple actions like not showing up for work or faking illnesses. Significant indicators of the Islamic Republic being degraded would include continued targeting of the regime leadership and clerical establishment, reports of security forces and political leaders fleeing the country, and shortages of food, fuel, and basic goods. These metrics are critical to understanding how the regime is withstanding the pressures of the war.

Dennis Ross

President Trump's vague objectives in this war have maximized his freedom of choice and ability to define what success looks like—and left others in the dark. Representatives of his administration have not made themselves available on talk shows and the like, while Trump's own comments about giving the Iranian people a chance to pursue their own future have left observers wondering: is the United States pursuing regime change?

Conventional wisdom says it is impossible to execute regime change with just an air campaign and no boots on the ground. The United States and Israel have been targeting the Islamic Republic's command and control through strikes on IRGC and Basij sites across the country, aiming in part to weaken the military and produce defections. Yet questions persist about the endpoint of a "regime change" campaign and the feasibility of being able to achieve that goal any time soon.

Hence, an alternative objective for the war may be "regime weakening." Making the Islamic Republic vulnerable and incapable of threatening the region could force senior regime officials to change their behavior, along the lines of recent developments in Venezuela. After the June 2025 war, some Iranian elites began to raise questions about the Supreme Leader's failed strategy of making huge investments in foreign terrorist proxies and nuclear infrastructure. A campaign focused on weakening the regime could help widen those internal fractures, creating the potential to change Tehran's posture by cutting a deal with any emerging new leaders who express a willingness to make concessions acceptable to Trump.

A "regime weakening" strategy could also enable the White House to end the war unilaterally and claim broad success, both for imposing a price on the regime after its mass killing of protesters and for profoundly decreasing its ability to threaten the region. In this scenario, Trump could threaten to impose a much more severe price if Tehran tries to continue hostilities after he orders U.S. forces to stop. The biggest risk of this approach isn't Iran continuing the war, but another mass killing campaign against the Iranian people if they rise up to take advantage of the regime's weakness.

Tehran has also seemingly miscalculated by attacking the Gulf states. Launched in the hope of convincing Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and others to pressure Trump on stopping the war, these attacks have produced the opposite effect: isolation of Iran and Gulf coalescence against the regime. The net result has been to increase the potential for postwar regional integration and illustrate the value of security partnerships with the United States.

Trump's willingness to deploy hard power also leaves Russia and China looking largely irrelevant in the Middle East. Should Iran look for a way out of the war, it might turn to Moscow as a mediator. Vladimir Putin may indeed have an interest in reasserting his regional relevance, trying to rescue a partner regime, and offering Washington an off-ramp. But he would have to deliver concessions that Trump deems meaningful.

Dana Stroul

When considering direct military strikes against Iran, previous presidents weighed three key factors:

1. **The risk of Iranian missile and drone attacks across the Middle East, including against civilian population centers, energy infrastructure, and U.S. military interests.**
2. **The potential activation of regional proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi and Syrian militias capable of threatening Israeli and U.S. interests.**
3. **The likelihood that U.S. strikes would provoke Tehran to double down on the nuclear program and other elements of its regional destabilization strategy rather than change its behavior.**

During the three prior rounds of direct conflict with Iran that have erupted since October 2023, these worst-case scenarios did not unfold. Yet Iran's retaliation during the current campaign is in line with those assumptions. The regime is using its missiles and drones against a quickly expanding scope of targets, which now include civilian airports, hotels, oil tankers, and energy infrastructure. It is also important to highlight the human cost of this conflict, with families and children across the region unaccustomed to the anxieties of war they are now facing. The risks will be felt in the United States as well, from financial costs and personnel risks to munition replenishment issues and strains on the defense industrial base.

Congressional action in response to Trump's military buildup would have been most consequential before hostilities began. Although Article II of the Constitution gives the president substantial authority in the face of imminent threats, attempting to limit this authority with a pending War Powers Resolution vote will not affect the current operation.

From a military standpoint, the campaign represents an unprecedented combined operation between U.S. and Israeli forces, leveraging lessons learned since 2023 about intelligence sharing, target development, communication, and operational deconfliction. Moreover, rather than publicly blaming the United States and Israel, most Gulf, Arab, and European partners have condemned Iran's indiscriminate retaliatory strikes; some are even considering whether to join military operations to defend against Iran's attacks. The leadership of U.S. Central Command deserves significant credit for quietly building the technical, operational, and political connective tissue that has enabled rapid intelligence sharing and air defense coordination with regional partners, who have intercepted hundreds of ballistic missiles and drones despite broader regional tensions.

Several key indicators should be closely monitored going forward: a rise in casualties, particularly U.S. losses; the human and political impact that a high-risk campaign could have on American families; the strain on Gulf air defenses; the domestic pressure that Arab leaders may face as their

societies absorb repeated attacks without adequate civil defense infrastructure; and oil market volatility, including the potential for further price spikes if the Strait of Hormuz closes. The arithmetic of missile and interceptor stockpiles will be crucial as well—U.S.-supplied air defenses are effective but finite, and Iran’s missile inventories are likewise limited, making the pace and sustainability of escalation critical.

Robert Satloff

Among the unique aspects of this war are the most significant display of U.S.-Israeli military cooperation in history, and the Rubicon-crossing American decision to participate in an operation that targets and kills the political leader of an adversary country (Khamenei). President Trump has defined a wide array of objectives for the operation, from taking out remnants of the nuclear program all the way to regime change. This gives him lots of opportunities to declare victory when he so chooses.

Among the many scenarios to be considered is how Trump might react if the situation reaches a point where the Iranian people heed his call to take back their country. Would he provide them with operational support (i.e., air cover) to protect them from regime counterattacks? Or would he **leave them to their fate** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/long-sad-history-us-regime-change-promises>) like President George H. W. Bush in 1991?

A particularly surprising element is Tehran’s strategy of trying to internationalize the conflict from the outset. The Islamic Republic began this war as the world’s loneliest regime, with no allies willing to provide substantive support. Regime leaders then made their situation worse by attacking countries throughout the region, turning governments who wanted to stay out of the war into adversaries lining up to provide verbal and practical support against Tehran. Once unimaginable, discussions about joint Arab and Israeli efforts to strike a common Iranian enemy have become real. Saudi and Emirati tensions have dissipated for now, as displayed in their recent joint statement condemning Iranian attacks, while Lebanon has called for renewed negotiations with Jerusalem following Hezbollah’s move to join the war by launching rockets into northern Israel.

Although the war has just begun, the situation has moved at warp speed so far. It was just a week ago that President Trump touted low gas prices during his State of the Union address; he now has a pressing interest in making sure the fighting does not overturn this achievement for the long term or damage the American economy more generally, especially in the run-up to this year’s midterm elections. Waging a long “hot war” would be a new experience for the administration and may be a costly one in political terms, so there is a real possibility Trump will bring it to an end and declare victory as soon as he has a clearly defined objective he can tout as success.

This summary was prepared by Sarah Boches, Shivane Anand, Nava Goldstein, and Meredith Zielonka. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖

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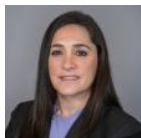
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