

The Confusion in Washington Spreads from the Top Down

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Mar 3, 2026

Also published in *Arabian Gulf Business Insight*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker Senior Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Articles & Testimony

There is the fog of war, and then there is the Trump administration.

Washington, the centre of the diplomatic world, is suffering from indigestion. The [Iran crisis \(https://www.agbi.com/topics/iran-israel-conflict/\)](https://www.agbi.com/topics/iran-israel-conflict/) means there is too much happening and too much to try to explain. The style and personality of President Trump and his administration only adds to the challenge.

Firstly, define Washington. It is a small city where political and diplomatic power is concentrated in only a small north-west segment. The magnificent Congress building is one corner, the White House is effectively another. The players, both political and commentators, live in the leafy suburbs beyond, and generally keep office hours.

The assassination of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [on Saturday \(https://www.agbi.com/oil-and-gas/2026/02/gulf-markets-brace-as-us-strikes-iran/\)](https://www.agbi.com/oil-and-gas/2026/02/gulf-markets-brace-as-us-strikes-iran/) took the city—as well as the world—by surprise.

Normally Washington rests on the weekend. But by the evening hundreds of anti-Islamic regime supporters were marching through the fashionable main street of Georgetown, a mile from the White House, waving old imperial-style Iranian flags as well as the Star of David of Israel—and disrupting my attempts to get to a birthday dinner.

By Monday a different reality had established itself. The US and Israel could be winning militarily but what did they want to emerge as the new government in Iran, and how were they going to get there?

A subsidiary question was how long was it going to take? Admitting ignorance or the lack of a good answer to any question is not a Washingtonian's strength. So the debate began to stumble.

President Trump was quoted saying the war could last four or five weeks. Yet the *Wall Street Journal* [carried an analysis \(https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-races-to-accomplish-iran-mission-before-munitions-run-out-c014acbc?mod=middle-east_trendingnow_article_pos2\)](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-races-to-accomplish-iran-mission-before-munitions-run-out-c014acbc?mod=middle-east_trendingnow_article_pos2) saying the US and its allies could deplete their reserves of anti-missile munitions in a matter of days, implying an earlier forced stop.

And what was the new Iran going to look like? Mr Trump said most of the leadership candidates were now dead, suggesting that they were among the 40 or so figures in Khamenei's cadre who had been killed. None of them were democrats anyway, so what was going on?

To add to a growing muddle of what had happened and what might happen, Marco Rubio, who combines the roles of both national security adviser and secretary of state, was quoted saying that the US launched strikes against Iran because it learned that Israel was going to attack anyway.

The question of why the bigger partner in the relationship acted when it did was only partly deflated when Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the leadership of President Trump in an interview on Fox News for his "quick and decisive action".

But Netanyahu went on to say he wanted a democratically elected government in Iran, which seemed at odds with Trump's lesser standard.

The next couple of days should see the prioritisation of finishing the military tasks. Other likely agenda items will be ensuring that **oil supplies to the world are re-established** (<https://www.agbi.com/analysis/logistics/2026/03/strait-of-hormuz-tensions-snarl-trade-as-ships-divert/>), as well as **air traffic** (<https://www.agbi.com/aviation/2026/03/emirates-to-resume-limited-number-of-flights/>), and anti-US actions are squashed.

Monday saw some ugly demonstrations in the region outside US diplomatic facilities and even a drone attack on the US embassy in Riyadh.

Despite successes against Iranian missiles and air defence, Tehran's arsenal has not been fully depleted. And some of its missiles are astonishingly accurate, reportedly to within 20 or even 10 yards. That's a building rather than a block, or even an offshore gas installation as used by Israel in the eastern Mediterranean. Statistically, there is a chance a missile will get through.

It is worth highlighting an Iranian missile strike on Sunday which hit the Israeli city of Beit Shemesh, west of Jerusalem. Nine people died and several buildings were destroyed, including an air raid shelter and synagogue.

Unmentioned in the reporting was that Beit Shemesh abuts the Israeli air base of Sdot Micha. This secret facility, spread across acres of forest, is where Israel has installed its nuclear-tipped Jericho missiles, capable of hitting Iran.

Although the Washington commentariat probably isn't aware of this detail—which neither Israeli nor US officials like to discuss—the issue is a headache to bureaucrats.

Not only is the current crisis about getting rid of a near-nuclear, missile-armed trouble-making regime in Tehran, it is also about the stopping of a possible nuclear strike.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy. This article was originally published on the Arabian Gulf Business Insight website (<https://www.agbi.com/opinion/defence/2026/03/the-confusion-in-washington-spreads-from-the-top-down/>)



RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Wartime Role of Iran’s “Axis”: Countering Proxy and Terrorist Threats](#)

Mar 5, 2026



Assaf Orion,
Hanin Ghaddar,
Michael Knights,
April Longley Alley,
Michael Jacobson,
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/wartime-role-irans-axis-countering-proxy-and-terrorist-threats\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Another Lebanon Campaign: A Path Toward Peace?](#)

Mar 4, 2026



Assaf Orion

[\(/policy-analysis/another-lebanon-campaign-path-toward-peace\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[America and Israel’s War to Remake the Middle East](#)

Mar 4, 2026



Dana Stroul

[\(/policy-analysis/america-and-israels-war-remake-middle-east\)](#)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy ([/policy-analysis/us-policy](#))

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-
analysis/iran)