

Getting Iran Policy Back on Track

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Articles & Testimony

Despite its underwhelming results, the war has demonstrated that many American partners in the region are able and willing to shoulder a greater burden in securing common interests—though that may not mean much without a more careful and collaborative U.S. policy planning process.

The first half of 2026 saw a sharp shift in the United States’ approach toward the Middle East—though perhaps a brief one. In the wake of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that Americans judged too costly and unsuccessful, Presidents Trump and Biden hesitated to repeat these errors. Yet this reluctance manifested itself in different ways. President Biden retained the moralism of the previous era but abjured its reliance on military force. President Trump rejected moralism in favor of narrow self-interest while continuing to employ limited force, such as in Yemen in early 2025 or in Iran in June 2025.

These changes were not entirely motivated by fear of reprising predecessors’ mistakes, however. They were based as well on the notion that the United States had less at stake in the Middle East and that the region was calmer and less conflict-prone than in the past. In 2023, prior to Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel, then-National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan wrote

(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/system/files/pdf/2023/FA_102_6_ND2023_Sullivan_print_edition_version.pdf)

, “although the Middle East remains beset with perennial challenges, the region is quieter than it has been for decades.” In a similar vein, the Trump Administration’s 2025 National Security Strategy

(<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>) asserted,

“conflict remains the Middle East’s most troublesome dynamic, but there is today less to this problem than headlines might lead one to believe.”

Taken together, these impulses and assessments produced a more restrained, long-term American policy toward the

region than in previous decades. The decade from 2016-2026 saw the successful application of diplomacy, producing the Abraham Accords; the judicious use of force, contributing to the successful defense of Israel and other U.S. partners following the October 7, 2023, attacks and the crippling of Iran's nuclear program in 2025; and the exercise of patience, contributing to the ultimate fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in late 2024. These years also witnessed bipartisan efforts to recruit Gulf states to collaborate with the United States in global efforts to promote their common interests, for example in securing technology investments and supply chains or in developing renewable energy sources. While the United States also experienced setbacks to its interests, it began to view the Middle East as a source of opportunities, not just problems, and the states there as partners rather than objects of policy.

War with Iran

These successes made President Trump's decision to launch a war against Iran in February 2026 all the more perplexing. In doing so, he flirted with a reprise of earlier chapters of American policy in the region, which were characterized by neoconservative notions of spreading democracy through military intervention as in Iraq or Afghanistan, or exercising a "responsibility to protect" civilian populations from brutal regimes, as in Libya. Those wars were fundamentally non-strategic, in that their aims could not be reconciled with the means the United States was willing or able to devote to achieving them. In attempting to achieve grand ambitions economically, these conflicts gave rise to secondary problems like the insurgency in Iraq or the fragmentation of Libya.

Perhaps with those bracing examples in mind, the Trump Administration sought a quick conclusion to the conflict. But like his predecessors, President Trump grappled with two dilemmas—an unforeseen problem to which the war itself gave rise, namely Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and the political imperative to justify the sunk costs of war, particularly the expenditure of U.S. military resources and the increase in energy and other costs.

The administration likely saw the June 17 U.S.-Iran Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as the least costly option for resolving these dilemmas. The MOU was a transaction—Iran seemed to agree to reopen the Strait of Hormuz (albeit while reserving the right to charge for passage in the future) in exchange for economic incentives from the United States, including sanctions relief and a promise to unfreeze at least some Iranian assets held abroad. Tacked on to this exchange was an agreement to seek, within an ambitious 60-day timeline, a "final deal" which envisioned comprehensive economic relief for nuclear concessions from Iran. This may have been window dressing to enable each side to portray the MOU and the war as a victory domestically; if so, it backfired in the United States, as it appeared so lopsided in Iran's favor that it cast the entire MOU as an American capitulation. Nevertheless, Iran quickly violated the agreement, perhaps sensing American impatience to move on.

Postwar Challenges and Opportunities

The March-June 2026 conflict with Iran accomplished little for the United States, especially when weighed against its costs, which included the loss of lives on both sides, the significant drawdown of hard-to-replace munitions, the slackening of pressure on Russia and weakening of NATO as a result of President Trump's anger at American allies for their lukewarm support of the conflict, and the loss of American credibility in the region and beyond. Ironically, however, the major achievement of the second Trump term, largely accomplished in June 2025, has been the decimation of Iran's nuclear program and the reduction of the threat it poses to its lowest level of the 21st century. This, however, makes all the more puzzling the Trump Administration's willingness to trade all of the United States' remaining sanctions on Iran for the modest nuclear concessions Iran has left to offer, when the recent conflict suggests that Iran's missiles, drones, and proxies currently pose the greater threat to U.S. interests and regional stability.

Going forward, the United States will continue to face a number of challenges from Iran.

- **A rump, hard-line Iranian regime.** U.S. and Israeli strikes decimated the Iranian regime leadership, and it may be

evident only after the war who leads Iran, how firm is their control, and what their attitude toward the United States will be. It is entirely possible that the regime will fall to infighting, or that Iranians will once again rise up and challenge the regime's authority. However, it is reasonable to assume at least for a time that the surviving members of the Iranian regime will be even more inclined toward the use of force than their predecessors, and that they will seek to rebuild key elements of Iran's national power, including its proxy network, missile force, and nuclear capability. The conclusion of the war will not mean the end of the need for an intense U.S. policy focus on Iran, to include economic and diplomatic pressure on the regime, close monitoring of nuclear and missile sites and activities, and more robust support for the Iranian people. Confronting these threats means avoiding a nuclear deal that trades away the United States' most powerful coercive instruments for relatively modest nuclear concessions from Tehran.

- **Continued threats to freedom of navigation.** Having successfully closed the Strait of Hormuz through deterrence, the Iranian regime may continue to menace commercial shipping and naval vessels that seek to pass through the chokepoint, and Yemen's Houthi rebels may periodically do the same in the Bab el-Mandeb strait. Eliminating the offensive threat posed by both is likely impractical due to the ubiquity of the missiles and drones they employ to accomplish their deterrence. As a result, these threats will need to be addressed through a combination of military presence, better counter-missile and -drone defenses, and diplomacy. The United States must remain committed to the principle of free navigation through these maritime chokepoints regardless of any deal the Arab Gulf states conclude with Tehran, and it should deploy to the region a multilateral naval coalition to signal broad international support for that principle.
- **Fractured partnerships.** Frustration with the U.S. prosecution of the war with Iran, rising rivalry among Gulf states, and mounting American popular discontent with Israel will likely all contribute to difficulties in managing the U.S. system of partnerships in the Middle East. While there is no catchall approach to addressing these problems, a more consistent and collaborative approach to U.S. engagement of partners to address common interests, and efforts to communicate to Americans the benefits of that engagement, are important initial steps.

Despite its underwhelming results, the war illuminated the continued importance of the Middle East to U.S. interests and demonstrated that American partners in the region are able and, in many cases, willing to shoulder a greater share of the burden of securing those interests. Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia all engaged in significant offensive operations in Iran, and far more states participated in the effort to defend against Iranian missile and drone attacks. There are clear opportunities going forward in the region: to build or strengthen governments in Lebanon and Syria that are more closely aligned with the United States and to continue building the capabilities of and cooperation among U.S. partners. But seizing these opportunities will require sober U.S. leadership, a willingness to take partners' interests and views into account, and most of all, a more careful policy planning process that assiduously matches ends to means.

Michael Singh is the managing director and Steven D. Levy Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published as part of the Reagan Institute compilation [The Future of Conservative Internationalism, Volume VII \(https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/publications/getting-iran-policy-back-on-track\)](https://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan-institute/publications/getting-iran-policy-back-on-track). ❖

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