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End States, Not End Dates:
Defining Success for Operation Epic Fury

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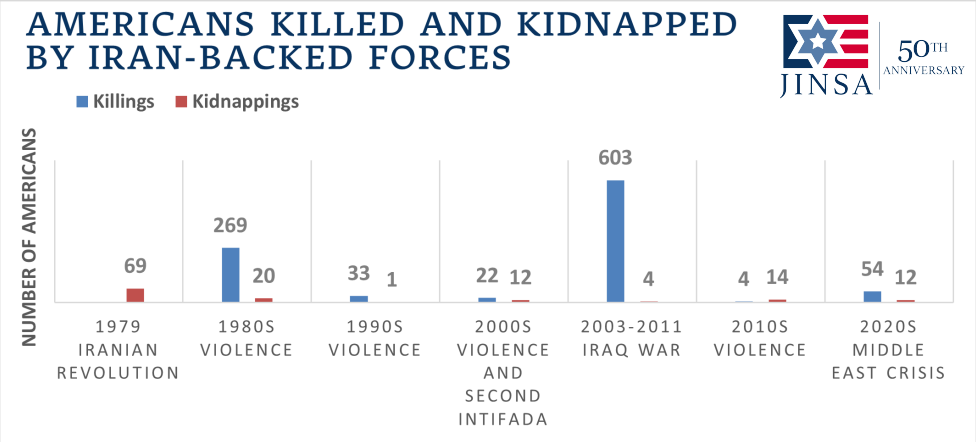
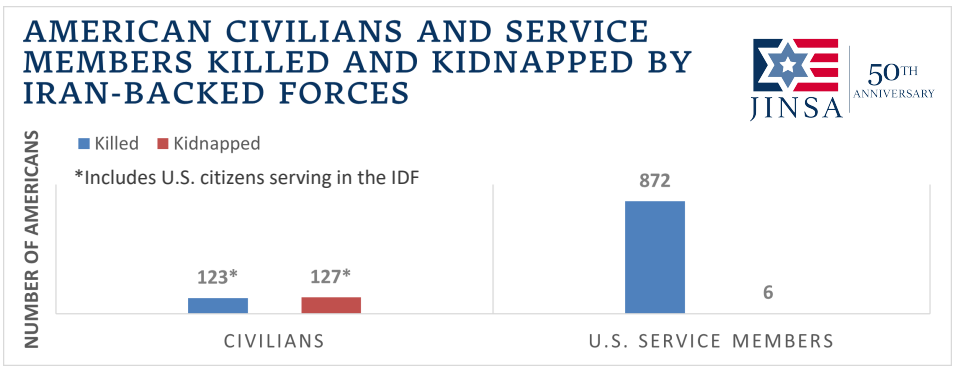
Introduction

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has been at war with the United States and Israel, killing directly or indirectly nearly one thousand American soldiers and maiming thousands more. It has developed strategic capabilities to dominate the Middle East and threaten American servicemembers, citizens, bases, partners, and eventually our homeland.[1] Operation Epic Fury may not end Iran's regime, which makes it all the more important to dramatically diminish Iran's nuclear weapons program, missile and drone capabilities, and threats to freedom of navigation in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.



These end states, rather than end dates, should set the standards for operational success. Pursuing such rigorous benchmarks will buy as much time as possible for the regime eventually to collapse at the hands of its own deeply-alienated population, before it can rebuild its military capabilities in any meaningful way. It also will reduce the barriers to action for future U.S. administrations that may be less likely to resort to force. Thus, to the extent the United States does not reach these benchmarks before the current conflict ends, it will need a clear and proactive postwar strategy, premised on credible military readiness, to stop Iran from reconstituting the threats that prompted Epic Fury in the first place. This strategy should proceed from the assumption that Iranian leadership will have strong incentives and urgency to revive its military and nuclear capabilities, and to redouble the defiance and escalation that endured the worst its most powerful enemies could throw at it.



Benchmark #1: The Nuclear Weapons Program

Assuming it survives, the Iranian regime—especially one now dominated by hardline elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—can be expected to pursue a nuclear weapon with renewed determination and urgency as the best insurance policy against its existence ever being threatened again. Such prioritization makes all the more sense in light of the fact that the main pillar of Iran's strategic deterrence—its enormous missile arsenal and production capacity—will likely emerge from this war badly battered for years to come. The regime's assiduous efforts over decades to complicate military action against it by dispersing, burying, and obfuscating its bomb-building program already impose a high bar for U.S.-led success in neutralizing the biggest potential Iranian threat to the region and United States. Iran will have a strong incentive to doubledown on this strategy.

Iran's known main enrichment-related and weaponization sites were damaged or destroyed by U.S.-Israeli operations in October 2024, June 2025, and March 2026, but its eviction of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors from all but its safeguarded power and research reactors leaves the full extent and current status of Iranian nuclear activities uncertain.[2] To the extent these capabilities remain intact and/or unknown, the United States and Israel will need to prepare to resume military operations in the future. Even if the entirety of Iran's nuclear program is found and eliminated, comprehensive inspections and intelligence collection will be necessary to ensure Iran does not resume progress toward the bomb.

Accordingly, the United States should seek to neutralize, in one form or another, each of the following elements of Iran's nuclear weapons program.

A. Nuclear Material: Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) Stockpile

- Iran's stockpile of over 400 kilograms (kg) of 60 percent HEU, some 10-12 bombs' worth, is believed to be trapped in tunnels at the Isfahan complex struck by U.S. Navy cruise missiles last summer, though the IAEA has raised concerns that some of this 400 kg could be located in other subterranean sites at Natanz, Fordow, and/or elsewhere.[3]
- Iran could produce a crude test device with perhaps just one-tenth of this stockpile, without further enrichment—a process it reportedly researched before the 12-Day War.[4]
- Benchmark for operational success: full accounting and neutralization of the stockpile by removing it in entirety from the country, or rendering it effectively inaccessible to Iran—most likely through heavy bombing that would further entomb the HEU under hundreds, or even thousands, of tons of reinforced concrete and granite.

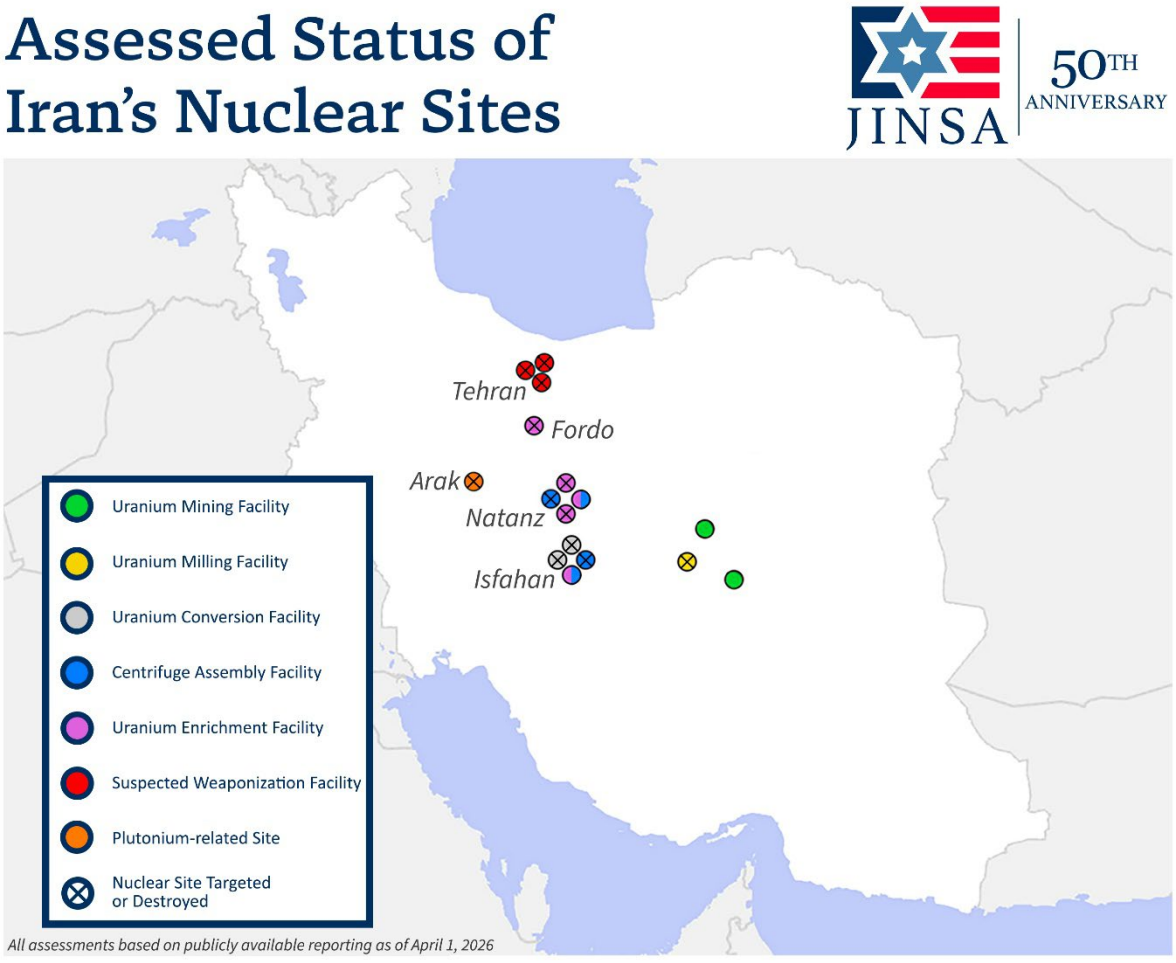
- Minimum postwar mechanism: if the material is not exfiltrated from Iran militarily or via a diplomatic agreement, rigorous and continuous intelligence-gathering and monitoring, sufficient to provide ample strategic warning for U.S. and/or Israeli military action to defeat any Iranian attempt to excavate and recover the HEU.

B. Undeclared Nuclear Facilities: Pickaxe Mountain, (Near?) Isfahan, and Weaponization

- Two new enrichment-related facilities whose operational status remains uncertain—inside "Pickaxe" Mountain near Natanz and an undisclosed location near Isfahan—have never been visited by inspectors and are believed to be too deeply-buried to be neutralized by even the most powerful bunker buster bombs.[5]
- Sites and personnel related to Iran's efforts to build a nuclear device have been struck repeatedly in recent years, including in ongoing operations, but the regime's decades of sprawling work on this front, and systematic lying to the IAEA, are abiding concerns.[6]
- Fortification and other activity has been observed at Pickaxe between the 12-Day War and the current conflict. This underscores concerns Iran could use undeclared facilities to advance toward a nuclear weapon, including by storing and/or enriching HEU.[7]
- Benchmarks for operational success:
  - » Rendering the Pickaxe facility inoperable and inaccessible to Iran, or having a high confidence intelligence assessment that the facility is not close to being operational for enrichment or other nuclear weapons-related work and that the United States and/or Israel will have sufficient strategic warning to act, should Iran attempt to go operational.
  - » Verifying the location and operational status of the new Isfahan facility and, if necessary, rendering it inoperable and inaccessible to Iran.
  - » Destroying or rendering inoperable all suspected weaponization-related sites.
- Minimum postwar mechanism: rigorous and continuous intelligence-gathering and monitoring, sufficient to ensure Iran cannot utilize these facilities to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program.

C. Fuel Production Capacity: Enrichment and Reprocessing

- Iran's known facilities for an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle were targeted extensively in the 12-Day War—chiefly, Fordow, Arak, and complexes at Natanz and Isfahan—but the regime has never softened its insistence on retaining and rebuilding such infrastructure.[8]
- Aside from Iran's safeguarded reactors at Bushehr and Tehran, any ability to enrich and reprocess uranium on its own soil means it can continue to pose proliferation concerns.
- Benchmark for operational success: rendering inoperable or inaccessible any remaining known or suspected Iranian enrichment- and reprocessing-related sites.
- Minimum postwar mechanisms:
  - » Ensuring reliable monitoring to prevent reconstitution at such sites, new activities, and resupply of critical components or materials from abroad.
  - » Continuing IAEA monitoring and verification at Iran's civilian reactors, in compliance with Iran's IAEA safeguards obligations.

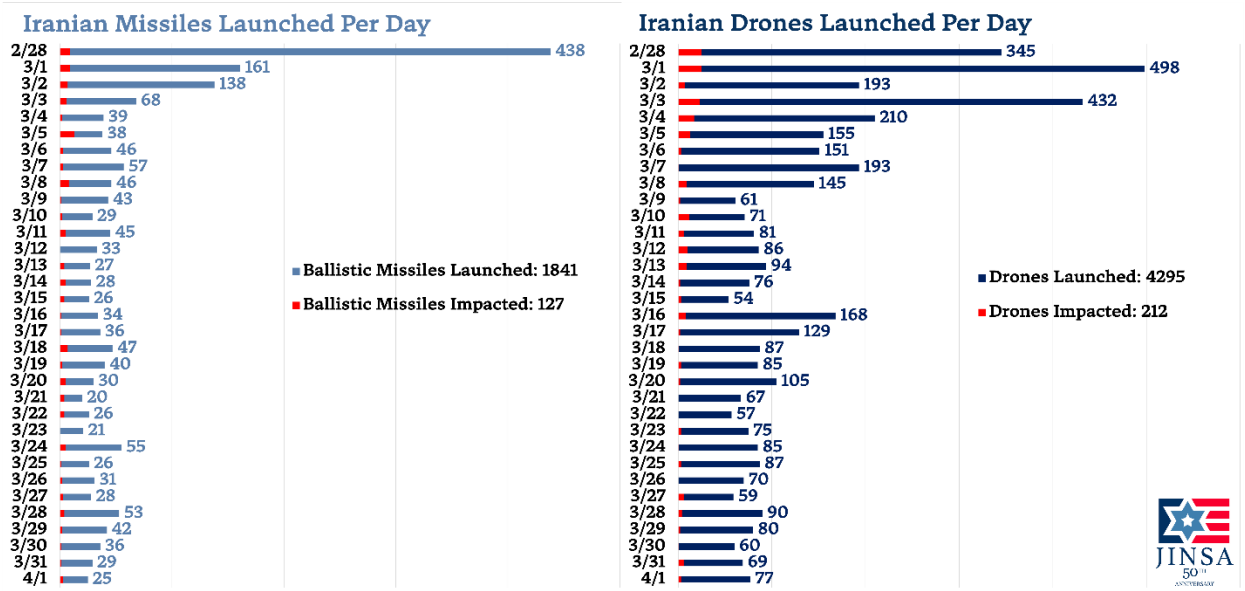


Benchmark #2: Missiles and Drones

Iran's ballistic missile arsenals appear to be significantly degraded by ongoing operations, reflecting U.S.-Israeli prioritization of this target set as a key threat. Its drone capabilities, while less capable of causing major damage than ballistic missiles, likely are more plentiful and dispersed.[9] Moreover, the regime has shown real ability and resolve to reconstitute its missile capabilities on two separate occasions, after Israeli airstrikes in October 2024 and June 2025 that depleted its missile stocks, command and control, launchers, and/or production capacity.[10]

A. Fire Rates

- Even as its average daily missile and drone launch rates trend generally downward, Iran's forces are adapting their launch tactics and locations so as to sustain fires as long as possible, even at the cost of smaller and less frequent salvos.[11]



B. Reconstitution Capacity

- Even as its missile and drone capabilities are eroded further and operational priorities shift elsewhere, Iran likely retains residual launch, storage, and production capacity.
- China, North Korea, and Russia have assisted Iran's missile and drone development and reconstitution, all of which are subject to stringent enforcement authorities spelled out in UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions targeting Iran's international arms trade.[12]
- Benchmark for operational success: eliminating known missile and drone launchers, production lines, stockpiles, and storage facilities.

- Minimum postwar mechanism: U.S.-led coalition, including regional partners, to gather and share intelligence on Iranian reconstitution efforts, and to enforce UNSC sanctions prohibiting Iranian missile and drone development, testing, and technology transfers.

Benchmark #3: The Strait of Hormuz

Iran's threats to vital shipping lanes around the Strait of Hormuz have been most impactful in terms of its strategy to magnify the war's economic costs regionally and globally. It has done so even as its conventional naval and anti-ship missile capabilities are actively being degraded. Having achieved such asymmetric effects, Tehran speaks of controlling passage through the Strait more permanently, even after the current conflict.

A. Military Threats to Freedom of Navigation

- While its conventional naval and anti-ship missile capabilities decline, Iran's attack boats, anti-ship drones, and naval mines pose residual and dispersible threats that can dissuade commercial vessels and insurers from risking transit of the Gulf and Hormuz, even if naval escort operations are provided.

B. Iran Rules the Waves?

- The de facto closure of the Strait, and the lack of U.S. warships in the Gulf, reinforces the regime's message to the world, and its conviction, that it is the arbiter of shipping in one of the world's most important waterways, giving it dangerous degrees of deterrence and predominance that it did not enjoy before the war.
- Benchmarks for operational success:
  - » Quickly restoring freedom of international shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.
  - » Reestablishing military dominance in the Gulf via naval and air operations.
- Minimum postwar mechanism: international maritime security coalition to uphold freedom of navigation in the Gulf, Hormuz, and adjoining waters.

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