

How This War Will End, If It Ends Now

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After four weeks of Epic Fury against Iran, the majority of Americans, and perhaps President Donald Trump himself, appear focused on the same question posed by General David Petraeus in Iraq: “tell me how this ends.” It is the wrong question to ask. The better one is “tell me what happens after this ends.”

Focusing merely on ending the war risks betraying the strategic rationale for initiating it in the first place. What advances U.S. security and interests is not ending the war but ending it in such a way that its objectives have been achieved and it will not have to be fought again. Allowing political pressure to dictate military timelines by accepting a premature ceasefire or withdrawals from the Middle East has repeatedly failed for the United States. Ending this war now—as President Trump might announce tonight—is a recipe for repeating those same mistakes all over again: weakening the U.S., strengthening Iran, and dooming us to repeat the cycle of withdrawal and return to the Middle East of the last quarter century.

A Vicious Cycle of Early Withdrawals

The conventional wisdom now holds that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were failures and that any other military intervention in the region will suffer the same fate: a quagmire that drains the United States of blood and treasure with no clear way out and no benefit to U.S. interests. It is this fear of getting bogged down in another “forever war” that fueled the incessant questions of “how this ends” almost as soon as Operation Epic Fury had begun. But it is that fear that keeps the United States committing to only half-measures against its adversaries in the Middle East, and requiring the constant return of U.S. forces to the region.

Warnings of the challenges of waging war in the Middle East should not be ignored. Some of them may be intrinsic to the region itself, or at least parts of it—tribal societies, ethno-sectarian cleavages, and a long history of insurgency, to name a few. But a more judicious account of the U.S. experience in the Middle East suggests that many of those challenges have been created by the United States itself, and particularly U.S. policymakers much more so than the U.S. military. Foremost among those has been the issue of setting objectives: they have been unrealistic, changed over time, or entirely abandoned.

Indeed, it has been the repeated politically motivated premature cessation of U.S. military operations in the Middle East that deserves just as much of the responsibility for the “forever wars” of the last 25 years as their initiation in the first place. Just because policymakers want a conflict to be over and declare a mission accomplished before it truly is, does not somehow miraculously create peace and stability.

There is no clearer example of the strategic repercussions of exiting a conflict too early than President Barack Obama setting an artificial deadline for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2011. That departure, coupled with U.S. support for Nouri al-Maliki, an Iranian-aligned, Shiite strongman, as Iraq’s prime minister, contributed to the dynamics that allowed the Islamic State to spread like wildfire across Syria and Iraq, requiring a return of U.S. forces soon after they had departed.

The same dynamic of not seeing things through applies not just to U.S. wars against Sunni jihadists but also to dealing with the Iranian threat. Time and again, U.S. policymakers have chosen to kick the Iran problem down the road rather than confront it. That was true of Obama's nuclear deal, which in his [words](#) merely delayed Iran's program such that "in year 13, 14, 15, they have advanced centrifuges that enrich uranium fairly rapidly, and at that point the breakout times would have shrunk almost down to zero." It was similarly true of President Joe Biden's ending support for Saudi-Emirati operations against the Houthis in 2021 (his [rationale](#): "this war has to end") and President Trump [putting a stop](#) to Operation Rough Rider, also against the Houthis, in 2025, despite neither conflict having degraded or deterred the Iran-backed terrorist group.

This hot-and-cold approach to the Middle East, in which the United States sees a threat, takes action against it, but tires of the conflict before the threat has been dealt with, has created a constant cycle of in-and-out military deployments. It has also severely degraded our regional partnerships, as countries, unsure of whether the United States will be there to assist them, question the value of America's security commitments. Following the U.S. cutting off of support for them against the Houthis, and then doing nothing as they came under continued fire from the Houthis and Iran, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates visibly turned away from the United States in the early 2020s. Riyadh went so far as to restore relations with Iran in a deal brokered by China.

The United States, thus, not only leaves its adversaries in the Middle East intact, allowing them to grow stronger, but deprives itself of the partnerships it needs to address those threats more effectively and at lower cost to itself. It is this vicious cycle, fueled by premature ceasefires and withdrawals, that creates the perpetual threats and endless wars of the Middle East.

Why Is This War Different From All the Others?

Operation Epic Fury, however, does not have to be like the wars that came before.

[Iran is not Iraq](#), meaning that many of the inherent challenges of fighting the former conflict are simply not factors in the current one. Nor is the Iran war a burden being shouldered only, or principally, by the United States. While American forces were bolstered by an international coalition in both Iraq and Afghanistan, never did they have the level of cooperation and capabilities that Israel has brought to bear against Iran in its own Operation Roaring Lion.

Thus far, the objectives in Iran have been clear and unchanged: removing Iran's ability to project power and threaten the United States and its partners. As JINSA's Iran Policy Project outlines in a new report, this requires neutralizing all elements of the nuclear program, degrading Iran's ability to produce and fire ballistic missiles and drones, and removing Iran's ability to hold the Strait of Hormuz at risk. The United States and Israel have made clear and noticeable operational progress toward some of these goals, particularly against Iran's missile capabilities, suggesting that they are within reach.

Finally, unlike Iraq, the United States has clear, which is not the same as easy, options available that could bring this conflict to a conclusion. Trump had been simultaneously preparing two of them: a negotiated settlement with Iran and a massive escalation, potentially including the use of ground forces. A third oft-discussed avenue would be an undeclared understanding with remaining elements of the Islamic Republic regime that they will adopt changes to their behavior in line with Trump's preferences in return for the cessation of hostilities, the Delcy Rodriguez model from Venezuela. Alternatively, the United States could pursue some combination of all of these options: a deal on Iran's nuclear program and a military solution to its missile threats and opening the Strait of Hormuz, for example.

Nagging fears of an unending conflict, begetting questions of “how this ends,” are, thus, misplaced in this war. The far bigger danger for the United States will be rushing to end the war without having considered what comes next.

If It Ends Now

Should President Trump bring an end to Operation Epic Fury soon, without having achieved the major strategic objectives of degrading Iran’s power projection capabilities, it will set the Middle East on a path not only to further war but also likely to growing Chinese and Russian influence.

If the war ends now, Iran will be left with:

- About 440 kilograms of 60 percent enriched uranium. Although perhaps buried under rubble and observed by U.S. satellites, there is neither a deal in place nor further leverage to get one that would ensure international inspections of that uranium or any other Iranian nuclear activities. The United States (or Israel) will be faced with the choice to take new military action if they detect Iran trying to access the remaining uranium. But that is only if they detect it. Iran, which has been putting ever more of its military infrastructure underground, could try to dig a tunnel to get at it. It will also likely take several seemingly benign steps, perhaps digging near the site of the buried uranium or claiming that it needs to get at something in the same vicinity, to test and weaken U.S. resolve. It will also try to deter further U.S. action by reconstituting its other capabilities per below.
- The extant capability to fire drones and missiles across the Middle East and beyond. It also has the partnership, with Russia, China, and North Korea, to restock its arsenals quickly, without having to resume production at home. Indeed, Russia has already been resupplying Iran during the war. Again, the United States could monitor and threaten to strike any attempt to replenish Iran’s arsenal, such as shipments from overseas. But if it prematurely ends the war against Iran, Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang would rightfully question its resolve to resume the war, and potentially draw in more potent adversaries.
- De facto control of the Strait of Hormuz. Indeed, even if the United States reaches a deal that would see Iran reopen the critical waterway in exchange for a ceasefire, that would only serve to underscore that it is entirely up to Iran to decide whether maritime traffic passes through the Strait or not. This presumption of Iranian control, and the lesson that the United States was unable or unwilling to reopen the Strait, creates both an ongoing risk premium that will drive up shipping and energy costs into the future, albeit certainly less so than the war has done, and a playbook that Iran might very well return to.
- The belief that it went toe-to-toe with two of the most powerful militaries in the world and survived. This cannot help but embolden the IRGC-dominated regime going forward. Repeatedly, whenever it confronted the United States and Washington backed down, Iran learned that it could and should press its advantage harder. In 2019, for example, when Iran shot down a U.S. drone and President Trump balked at retaliating, Iran undertook a 6-month campaign of terror that targeted multiple commercial ships, a major Saudi oil facility, and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. It did not back down until Trump struck Major General Qassem Soleimani. While Tehran might be too weak to resume such aggression itself any time soon, it will certainly retain the lesson that by escalating violence it can force the United States to back down. And it will have other means by which to do that.

- A still capable proxy in the form of the Houthis in Yemen. In recent days they have proven that they retain the will and ability to fire at Israel and, presumably, to resume attacking Red Sea shipping, if need be. Thus, Iran now will sit astride and have de facto control over two of the world's major chokepoints for the flow of energy and commerce, giving it an outsize ability to dial up the political and economic pressure against the United States at will.

At the same time, by ending military operations now, the United States will be left with:

- Disappointed and disillusioned partners. Israel entered into this war believing it shared a common objective with the United States of ending the Iranian threat not for now, but for the long-term. If Iran retains its missile, drone, and nuclear programs, not to mention the Houthis, Israel will remain at risk from Iran. Even worse would be if the United States ends the conflict with some sort of agreement that would seemingly prohibit it from returning to eliminate Iranian nuclear or missile capabilities if Tehran tries to reconstitute them. That would create significant daylight between the U.S. position and Israel's security needs. But Israel is not the only regional partner that the United States would be leaving to confront a weakened, but vengeful Iran. The Arab Gulf states, while perhaps not initially consulted or keen on the war, came to realize that the only way to ensure that Iranian missiles and drones do not ever again rain down on their gleaming cities or energy facilities is to see the war through to the end. As much as President Trump rightfully takes America's NATO allies to task for not lending support in this conflict, at least to reopen the Strait, the Gulf states will have even stronger grounds to doubt the value of the U.S. partnerships for having jeopardized, but then again abandoned, their security needs. The turn away from the United States that began about five years ago and was briefly arrested by Operation Epic Fury will only accelerate. Saudi Arabia's pursuit of new security partnerships with Pakistan, Turkey, and perhaps even China would resume. The Emirates might conclude that rather than the United States and Israel holding the keys to security and prosperity, they are to be found in Beijing instead.
- Weakened global standing. Operation Epic Fury, coupled with other recent military interventions undertaken by President Trump, did much to shore up American credibility on the world stage. Powers that might have interpreted the precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and rhetoric about ending its overseas involvement as signs that the United States might not be willing to stand up to them, had to rethink those assumptions. With another rush to end military operations prematurely, any such concerns about a revitalized America among U.S. adversaries and competitors would now be seen to just have been a fleeting fever dream. Worse, Iran would have made clear just how the United States can be made to stand down: by widening the conflict rapidly and inflicting economic pain. That lesson is sure to be well-studied by Russia, China, and North Korea, who might attempt the same playbook. Worse yet, they might draw even closer to Iran and leverage its abilities to hold shipping in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea at risk to distract or deter the United States while they pursue their own ambitions in Europe or the Indo-Pacific.

So that is how this war ends, if it is ended now, too soon: with the United States to yet again repeat the cycle of departure, conflict, and return to the Middle East, with an even weaker hand to play and even less chance of success next time around.