



In Defense of the War, And How to Finish It

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The Iran war is a failure, and we should diplomatically conclude a deal to end it quickly. That seems to be the growing consensus among the media and politicians, including some in the Trump administration. Neither is correct.

The war has been a major success. The United States is in a stronger position, and Iran weaker, than it was on February 27, before the war started. It is important to keep it that way. Unless Iran completely capitulates to U.S. demands, a deal is unlikely to advance U.S. security and will only unnecessarily improve Iran's position. We should conclude this war soon, but only after weakening the Tehran regime even further to decrease its ability to pose a threat and increase the odds the Iranian people can bring it down.

Some of the criticism of the war is simply a reflexive negative reaction to anything President Donald Trump does. Yet, some of the criticism of Trump's handling of the war is valid. He did a poor job explaining the need for war to build support among the American people. It's not his personality or style to do so, but it would've helped, since this war is easy to explain to the American people.

The failure of sanctions, diplomacy, containment, and limited strikes in slowing the growth of the Iranian threat made a military confrontation—or a nuclear-armed Iran—inevitable. But, ironically, the reason the war had to happen now is because Trump talked too much, albeit admirably so, in his warnings to the Iranian regime in early January not to harm the peaceful protesters. He further [promised](#) the Iranian people that “help was on the way” and encouraged them to take over government institutions. This is in contrast to Presidents [Barack Obama](#) and [Joe Biden](#) who ignored major anti-regime demonstrations that erupted on their watch.

After Trump admirably vocalized such support, his credibility was on the line to do something once the regime began to massacre the demonstrators. Trump understood he had to act, even as he initially [minimized](#) Iranian defiance of his warnings. This, too, stood in contrast to his predecessors. Obama dismissed the importance of credibility when he didn't enforce his [redlines](#) against Syrian use of chemical weapons. The subsequent Russian invasion of Syria and Crimea proved otherwise, just as Russia's invasion of Ukraine following Biden's disastrous Afghan withdrawal proved that American fecklessness emboldens our adversaries.

Trump's January rhetoric prompted the timing of Operation Epic Fury, but the strategic necessity was already there. Even after the 12-Day War, Iran [maintained](#) nuclear material, whether buried under the bombed rubble or not. There were also the new, uninspected nuclear facilities Iran was building—one at [Pickaxe Mountain](#), which neither the United States nor Israel bombed in June because, being more deeply buried than Fordow, it is difficult to do so successfully, and another enrichment facility at [Isfahan](#) that was not even publicly known about until last May.

Meanwhile, Iran's ballistic arsenal was growing, with [assistance from China](#), which posed a serious threat to its neighbors, and could be a vehicle eventually for delivering nuclear bombs.

His early [1:00AM video](#) explained the war's goals on February 28: to prevent a nuclear Iran, destroy its missiles and industrial capability to produce them, destroy its navy, and create the conditions for the Iranian people to bring down the regime. He cited the Islamic Republic of Iran's killing of Americans for 47 years, noting it has been the world's leading sponsor of terror. He stressed the dangerous combination of long-range missiles with nuclear weapons, adding "we will destroy their missiles and raze their missile industry to the ground," and "we will ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon." He also declared, "We are going to annihilate their navy. We are going to ensure that the region's terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the region or the world and attack our forces." He concluded, directing his remarks to the Iranian people, "the hour of your freedom is at hand." After the war started, he exhorted them to "take over your government," noting it will probably be "your only chance for generations." He acknowledged there will be American casualties, but stated "we're doing this not for now. We're doing this for the future, and it is a noble mission."

So, have the United States and Israel achieved all these goals? Perhaps a better question is whether America is better off strategically, and more secure, today than on February 27?

The United States and Israel have together [carried out](#) almost 25,000 strikes, laying waste to Iran's military capabilities and defense industrial complex. According to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan Caine, U.S. forces [destroyed](#) 1,500 air defenses sites, 450 ballistic missile and 800 drone storage facilities, 150 ships, 95 percent of all naval mines, and 90 percent of all weapons factories. Israel reports that it has [disabled](#) 60 percent of Iran's ballistic missile launchers. Experts can argue over how many remain, but the big picture is the enormity of the destruction of Iran's military capabilities and its ability to reconstitute them.

To be sure, what is left of the Iranian regime still retains enough capabilities to pose a threat to the region. Despite six weeks of U.S. and Israeli efforts to decimate its missile and drone capabilities, it is still able to fire enough to [damage critical infrastructure](#) across the Middle East, put civilians at risk, and force the United States and its partners to [deplete critical air defenses](#) to dangerously low levels. That same projectile threat, coupled with its naval capabilities, has effectively closed the vital Strait of Hormuz.

Iran still is in possession of multiple bombs' worth of enriched uranium, albeit reportedly [buried](#) under rubble and requiring further enrichment. That might not be currently possible, given that Iran's enrichment known facilities were destroyed or damaged in the 12-Day War last June. But there is enough uncertainty about the status of those facilities and the presence of new ones that it is not possible to eliminate the possibility that Iran could, if it were to access that buried stockpile, be able to produce weapons-grade uranium dangerously quickly.

The war's critics point to all of that extant military and nuclear capability to argue that, however successful military operations have been in hitting targets, the objectives of degrading the Iranian threat have not been achieved.

That line of argument, however, only underscores the strategic rationale for the war. If Iran now—after six weeks and tens of thousands of strikes—is considered a dangerous menace to regional security, then what was it on February 27, before the war began? And what would it have been if it had continued on its trajectory—producing ever more enriched uranium, digging new, deeper nuclear facilities, and manufacturing hundreds of missiles a year—unchecked?

If the war is a failure now for not having degraded Iran's capabilities sufficiently, then every other policy leading up to the war—sanctions, negotiations, containment, limited strikes, appeasement—must be deemed an even greater failure for having done nothing but allowed Iran's capabilities to grow ever greater. Indeed, this war is cleaning up the mess accumulated over the decades, facilitated by the failure of the policies of the United States and other countries.

Even if the war were to end today, Iran would be far weaker and, therefore, the United States and its partners much safer, than before it began. But just because the war has been successful thus far, does not mean it has been successful enough to end. There are three main issues that still need to be addressed: Iran's nuclear program, the Strait of Hormuz, and the regime.

While Trump [stressed](#) preventing a nuclear Iran as a key justification for war, it's very possible the war will end without America or Israel destroying Iran's nuclear facilities and removing its enriched uranium. This was always the biggest challenge. Without access to classified information, it is hard to know what remains and is potentially accessible by the regime or the United States and/or Israel, but it's possible that the risks are too great to securely place forces in Iran to remove enriched uranium and render Pickaxe Mountain and other Iranian nuclear facilities inoperable.

If that's the case, then in the short-term the only means to ensure Iran does not restart its nuclear program will be to maintain the vigilance and capability to act if any future Iranian nuclear activity is detected. The risk here is that Trump might not have the stomach for another military operation in Iran, even over its nuclear program. And this regime, especially after the humiliation from this war, will be desperate to demonstrate its potency by trying to do something on the nuclear front, such as setting off a nuclear explosion in the desert.

Ultimately, therefore, the best and only sustainable way to prevent a nuclear Iran is for there to be true regime collapse. No Venezuela-type solution, with the regime in place and some so-called pragmatist as the face, but a true replacement of this regime with a true moderate government selected and empowered by the Iranian people.

To do that, the United States cannot cut a deal with this regime that involves any temporary suspension of nuclear enrichment, permits nuclear material or facilities to remain in place, and provides any sanctions relief for the regime. Indeed, a deal that permitted any of these things would provide an unexpected boost to a crumbling regime. That would demoralize the Iranian people, reducing the chance they will go back onto the streets and wrest control of the country from the regime, which would provide the greatest validation for the war, and severely undermine American credibility. Indeed, it would make a mockery of the military campaign for America to agree to any such deal. One could then legitimately question the purpose of the war if Trump would undermine two of his key wartime goals—preventing a nuclear Iran and facilitating the collapse of the regime. It would also invite mockery that he's simply cutting a JCPOA 2.0, agreeing to only a suspension of enrichment and enriching the regime. It's hard to believe that Trump would agree to that.

Just as bad, accepting any such deal, just like ending the war prematurely, would represent a major betrayal of our partners. Both Israel, which has proven itself America's most capable, dependable, and determined partner, and the Arab Gulf states, who have withstood weeks of Iranian bombardment, do not want to ever have to face a threat from Tehran. To leave the regime intact, legitimated, and with concessions allowing it to rebuild its arsenals would lead to major doubts across regional capitals about U.S. reliability and credibility. After the wholesale embrace of American leadership and the war effort, a failure to see the war through to the end would usher in another period of regional hedging, seeking out new security arrangements with Beijing and Moscow.

Of course, if the pressure of the American blockade, which we had [recommended](#) in January, on top of the last 40 days of war, compels Iran's leaders to agree to a deal that involves handing over the enriched nuclear material, granting access to all the nuclear sites, accepting invasive inspections, and committing to not interfering with tanker traffic in the Persian Gulf, without any sanctions relief, that's a deal Trump should accept and embrace.

Without such a good deal, Trump should recommit to enabling regime collapse. This is the only way to solve finally Iran's nuclear threat and cement American regional leadership. The fact is that the regime is in awful shape. It was already weak on February 27, unable to provide [regular water](#) and [electricity](#) to its people, [high inflation](#), and with its proxies [Hezbollah and Hamas](#) in terrible straits. The economic woes are what [triggered](#) the winter popular revolt. Now the country is in even worse shape. All the billions the regime poured into conventional weaponry and proxies—instead of the Iranian people—seems wasted. It now cannot export oil, from which most of its revenue is derived. It is [struggling](#) to produce enough petrochemicals for domestic demand. The government [can't pay](#) its employees.

The key is to keep the pressure on the regime further. That means soon declaring the end of the military campaign, with no diplomatic agreement, after it's determined that the United States and Israel have done what they can to weaken Iran economically, in its nuclear program and conventional military capability. The moment the war ends, the clock will begin to tick for the Iranian people to rise up. It will be vital that the United States give them every chance to succeed, by keeping its boot on the regime's economic neck, until the people rebel. And if/when Iranians rise up, the United States and Israel must try to protect the demonstrators from the air, such as Israel proved it could do with [drone strikes](#) on militia checkpoints. This would not only be a humanitarian imperative but would offer the chance a fantastic strategic win.

To that end, it will be essential that Iran not be able to earn revenue with which to restart its nuclear, military, and terrorist enterprises or resuscitate its economy. We will have to keep preventing Iran from exporting oil. If Trump feels he can maintain the blockade, that would best, but if he can't, then he must take over or destroy Iran's oil export facilities. A blockade is better if it can be maintained, while destroying oil export facilities would likely trigger an oil price spike, with negative political implications.

At the same time as denying Iran the ability to export oil, it is vital that the United States make the Strait of Hormuz safe for commercial shipping. Iran [declaring](#) the Strait open is not enough. Especially if it comes as a result of forcing Israel to accept a [ceasefire](#) in Lebanon, as appears to have happened. This only serves to affirm that it is Tehran that is in control of the Strait and that it has leverage to dictate what happens in Lebanon. Neither of these are acceptable outcomes for the United States. If, as General Caine has declared, Iran's major [naval and mining capabilities](#) have been eliminated, then the United States Navy should—as [two guided missile destroyers](#) already did—sail through the Strait and enter the Gulf. Once there, unlike the earlier exploratory foray, U.S. ships should remain to provide escorts and reassure commercial shipping.

When the regime might collapse, it's impossible to know. It's thus too soon to make a final verdict on this war. What we can say now is that the United States and Israel have inflicted tremendous damage on the regime's internal and external capacity for violence, and it is far weaker than it even was on February 27. Meaning America, and Israel, and America's Arab allies, are stronger. This makes the war a success. How successful it will be is yet to be determined, and won't be determined until after the fighting stops, when we hand it over to the Iranian people to determine their fate and our security, and the extent of the success of this war.