

Why Iran Fears Israel, But Not America

Michael Makovsky, PhD
President and CEO

As the U.S.-Iran tit-for-tat strikes continue, President Donald Trump might ask: why is it that Iran keeps attacking U.S. troops in [Arab countries](#) and [ships at sea](#), but not [those in Israel](#)? The main answer is that Iran fears Israel but not America.

President Trump repeatedly threatens to hit Iran [“hard”](#) in response to Iranian provocations, such as attacks on U.S. ships or U.S. military bases in Arab countries. In the last couple of months that has usually meant targeted strikes on tactical military targets. In July, for instance, in 13 consecutive nights of strikes following Iranian attacks, the U.S. military [targeted](#) Iranian military command centers, underground missile and drone sites, coastal surveillance assets, aircraft hangars, and small boats.

Those U.S. strikes were very effective in neutralizing Iran’s capabilities to attack energy tankers linked to Gulf Arab countries, enabling a meaningful rise in the flow of non-Iranian energy exports through the Strait of Hormuz, as the U.S. military blockaded Iranian oil exports. In exchanges in recent days, U.S. forces [struck](#) Iranian oil tankers after Iran targeted U.S. warships and American forces in Jordan. Controlling the strait has been Trump’s main focus for months, while also economically pressuring Iran.

The U.S. military has clearly acted very effectively, but as midterm elections get closer President Trump has sought to keep the politically unpopular conflict on a low burn. He even [said](#) on Friday, “I call it a military conflict because it’s small potatoes for us. It’s not a big thing.”

Is Trump correct?

Iran last directly attacked Israel three months ago in June. Since then, the U.S. has taken the sole lead with Iran both diplomatically (concluding the short-lived, disastrous June MOU) and militarily (blocking Iranian oil exports and enabling other oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz). This has made the United States Iran’s most immediate foe, with Israel on the sidelines. Iran still detests the Jewish state, but it prefers not messing with the powerful and determined Israeli military if it doesn’t have to.

Still, Iran [threatened Israel](#) if it took operational control of a major underground base of the Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, and did nothing when Israel [did just that](#) last Thursday. So, something else is involved in Tehran's calculus.

Specifically, Iran has been deterred by Israeli [threats](#). Israel has [clearly signaled](#) that if Iran attacks Israel, including U.S. forces stationed in Israel, Israel intends to hit back hard. By that it means, as Iran well understands, hitting Iranian internal energy facilities, such as refineries and natural gas infrastructure that generates electricity.

Israeli security officials have regretted the United States [stopped them](#) after Israel struck Iranian energy facilities in March. Israel also wants to attack missile and drone infrastructure, and possibly Iranian leaders. This all could cripple the Tehran regime and severely degrade its ability to project power internally and externally. The Iranian regime would likely lash out at Israel, U.S. forces, and regional energy facilities, but it would be short-lived, and the pressure on the regime would build.

Israel also wishes to neutralize Iranian nuclear material and sites, but for now only in collaboration with the United States. President Trump on Friday [said again](#) the United States might have to soon hit Pickaxe Mountain—an uninspected Iranian nuclear site, which might become [central to Iran's nuclear plans](#) and which neither the United States nor Israel has hit before because it is deeply buried. However, he [said](#) something similar two months ago and didn't follow up.

Despite all the damaging U.S. military strikes, the blockade of Iranian oil exports, and the new financial sanctions, Iran's leadership evidently doesn't yet fear President Trump and his threats enough not to attack American forces in non-Israeli countries.

What it fears the most is what Israel wants to do.

Trump has a choice this fall, before or after the midterms. He can maintain the current economic pressure on the Iranian regime and the more limited retaliatory strikes. This keeps economic pressure on the Tehran regime, spares Israel renewed conflict for now, and keeps the conflict at a lower temperature. This is impactful, but it doesn't deter.

Or Trump, along with Israel, can go for the jugular against the regime by hitting non-Hormuz-related Iranian targets that cripple the regime's ability to project power internally and externally. This would be even more meaningful and more likely to deter future Iranian attacks after the initial lash-out.

President Trump should opt for the second. The United States will look stronger and more victorious, the Tehran regime weaker, and American troops safer.