



PROCEEDINGS

ENDING THE THREAT FROM IRAN: POST-OPERATION EPIC FURY

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Ending the Threat from Iran: Post-Operation Epic Fury” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on March 24, 2026. The symposium examined the implications for American, regional, and global security of the U.S. and Israeli military strikes on the Islamic Republic, including the role of advanced missile and drone technology and the value of missile defenses.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

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Some of our panelists today coauthored a study we published last October advocating a new approach to dealing with the Iranian threat.¹ That study is available on our website as an *Information Series*, and called for a new policy that supports the Iranian people in their effort to overcome 47 years of oppression and tyranny, including a U.S. messaging strategy that exposes the regime’s corruption and internal repression; American support for the democratic opposition; the application of economic sanctions and other forms of pressure, including sanctioning Iran’s oil and gas industry; and using the U.S. military presence to deter and defend against Iranian military provocations.

Iran’s nuclear program, its ballistic missile program, its use of proxies to attack U.S. and allied interests, and its support for terrorism worldwide have posed significant challenges. Last June, Operation Midnight Hammer dealt a devastating blow to the Iranian nuclear program and contributed to a significant weakening of the Iranian regime’s geostrategic ambitions, including its support to terrorist proxies. More recently, the regime has been said to be weaker than at any time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, though that has not stopped it from brutally suppressing domestic protests.

Operation Epic Fury, and Israel’s Operation Roaring Lion resulted in the decapitation of much of Iran’s ruling leadership, the destruction of much of its residual nuclear capability, significant degradation of the regime’s conventional armed forces, including its Navy, and the undermining of Iran’s ability to foster and support terrorism in the region and around the world. Epic Fury also sought to end the regime’s brutality and oppression of its own people and to create opportunities for a new direction and a complete transformation of the Middle East dynamic.

The conflict has also reinforced the value of missile defenses in protecting societies against the devastating consequences of missile attacks. In addition, Israel’s directed energy system—the Iron Beam—was reportedly employed for the first time in combat against

¹ Robert Joseph, Joseph DeTrani, Keith Payne, David Shedd, and Robert Torriceli, “Ending the Threat from Iran,” *Information Series*, No. 638 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 1, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/robert-joseph-joseph-detrani-keith-payne-david-shedd-and-robert-torriceli-ending-the-threat-from-iran-issue-no-638-october-1-2025/.



Hezbollah strikes from the north and demonstrated the potential utility of directed energy technology in countering drones and small unmanned vehicles, though some have argued that its success has been exaggerated.²

And while the United States and Israel have conducted thousands of strikes against more than 7,000 Iranian targets, Iran has also demonstrated the ability to continue fighting and launching missile attacks not only against Israel but against U.S. bases and civilian infrastructure and targets in various Gulf states, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. In a first, Iran reportedly launched two intermediate-range ballistic missiles at Diego Garcia, demonstrating its ability to reach European capitals.³ Iran has also sought to close the vital Strait of Hormuz to commercial shipping, leading to reluctance on the part of shippers to transit the Strait and causing global instability in oil and gas prices.

More than three weeks into Operation Epic Fury, despite the death of Ayatollah Khamenei and many of the regime's leaders, Iran's clerical theocracy remains defiant, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps continues to control the nation's internal and external power structure, the Iranian military continues to launch missile attacks and is unwilling to capitulate, and the popular uprising that was hoped for to overthrow the ruling regime has yet to materialize. President Trump recently stated that the United States would postpone striking Iranian energy sources,⁴ declaring that he is considering "winding down" the war as the United States accomplishes its military objectives.⁵

Although Iran's military capabilities and support for its terrorist proxies have been weakened, important questions remain over whether air strikes alone can successfully bring about regime change; whether the Iranian people feel sufficiently empowered to take back their country after 47 years of oppression; whether and how the United States and its allies will support any such uprising; and whether Iran's existing stockpile of enriched nuclear material can be recovered and removed safely. In addition, the conflict raises broader questions about the prospect of nuclear proliferation in the region and elsewhere, as well as shifting political alignments and the future orientation of the greater Middle East.

In light of this, it seems a question worth addressing today is this: Is a cessation of hostilities and a declaration of victory post-Operation Epic Fury sufficient to end the threat from Iran?

² Assaf Gilead, "Iron Beam's limits exposed as Hezbollah drones breach northern Israel's skies," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 12, 2026, <https://www.jpost.com/defense-and-tech/article-889677>.

³ Francine Wolfisz and Elizabeth Ivens, "Europe Missile Fears: London, Paris and Berlin ALL 'under threat' from Iranian missiles after Tehran's mullahs 'use space rocket' to target British base on Diego Garcia - as experts warn the regime may have been 'seriously underestimated'," *Daily Mail*, March 21, 2026, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15667165/Iran-missiles-hit-Europe-experts-fear-Diego-Garcia.html?ito=conservative-news>.

⁴ "Trump says US and Iran in talks after he postpones strikes on power plants," *CNN*, March 23, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/iran-war-us-israel-trump-03-23-26>.

⁵ Sareen Habeshian, "Trump says he is considering 'winding down' Iran war," *BBC*, March 21, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpd5l00z7n6o>.

Robert G. Joseph

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When the Iran conflict broke out, like many others, I gave multiple interviews during the first week. In almost every case, there were three questions. The first was what comes next. My answer was that, in the days and perhaps weeks ahead, President Trump has made clear his determination to achieve the stated military objectives of the operation, Epic Fury:

1. To end the ballistic missile threat.
2. To eliminate the naval threat, especially to the Strait of Hormuz.
3. To end the regime's support to terrorist proxies.
4. And to foreclose permanently the pathway to a nuclear weapon.

The President also talked about the need for regime change—not by American boots on the ground but by the Iranian people. Recognizing the people's right to self-determination, he explicitly called for the people to take over the government and promised support.

The second question concerned the justification for American strikes against the regime. Here, my response was twofold. In my view, President Trump was fully justified in using force against Iran. The regime has been at war with the United States since its inception. It has murdered thousands of Americans from Beirut to Iraq and Afghanistan. It has used its terrorist proxies to kill Americans and our allies throughout the region and beyond. Murder and violence are in the DNA of the regime.

Perhaps even more important, the pursuit of nuclear weapons is also in the DNA of the regime. As for the imminence of the threat, the crude attempt to coerce U.S. negotiators by claiming possession of enough 60 percent enriched uranium for eleven nuclear bombs, settles the debate because the last step in enrichment to weapons grade can be measured in days.

For over 20 years, negotiations failed to end the nuclear threat. President Trump sought a diplomatic outcome but, unlike his predecessors, he rejected appeasement and insisted on an effective agreement that would guarantee an end to Iran's nuclear program. The regime rejected the offer, and gave every indication that it was determined to reconstitute its enrichment program, the unmistakable path to a nuclear weapon.

The third question was always who can lead Iran to a democratic, non-nuclear future? The son of the deposed Shah has shown himself to be quite skilled at public relations and self-promotion, despite having little, if any following inside Iran. To me, it is a wonder that any credence would be given to the prospect of reestablishing a discredited monarchy. Remember that the 1979 revolution was aimed at the overthrow of another corrupt and brutal regime—his father. President Trump has taken the measure of the man and has indicated that someone with the support of the people inside Iran should be the next leader. And he is right.

There is an organization that can meet the challenges ahead. And no doubt there are major challenges that will require resolve, capability, and more sacrifices. The NCRI/MEK has the vision, the organization, and the dedicated resistance units on the ground to fight and prevail over the regime.

Now, as the fourth week of military operations against Iran begins, the questions have changed. With such impressive military achievements already accomplished, the first question being asked by the media, and some U.S. leaders, is why hasn't Iran surrendered? The answer, it seems to me, is obvious: surrender means the end of the religious dictatorship to which its most ardent supporters remain bound by ideology and personal riches gained from decades of corruption. More importantly, it also means the exile and, in many cases, the likely death of its remaining leadership. While severely hurting on all fronts and more disparate than at any time since it seized power, the regime places survival above all other concerns. It has no intention of surrendering.

To succeed, it intends to play the same waiting game that succeeded against the French in Algeria, and against the United States in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The strategy is twofold. Externally, increase the pressure on President Trump, primarily by cutting off the oil supply, until he declares victory and withdraws, leaving in place the remaining elements of the regime. And internally, by brutally repressing any sign of dissent or protest. The public executions of the young champion wrestler and two other young men are a deadly warning to all Iranian citizens.

The most important question for the regime is can it hold onto power long enough to outlast President Trump and before the Iranian people rise up again as they did this past January? Closing the Strait of Hormuz and attacking the oil facilities of its Gulf neighbors put both economic and political pressure on the president.

Pain at the gas pump and the precipitous decline in the stock market are causing many Americans to ask when will this war end. Before the conflict, the president repeatedly cited the drop in oil prices and the rise of the market as major wins. No doubt he wants those days to return. And with the midterms coming in November, pressure can only grow. In Trump's view, if either house is won by the Trump-hating Democrats, he will face constant investigations and impeachments. The regime understands the potency of the pressure its actions are placing on the president.

Victory for the regime is simple: when the conflict ends, if it remains in power in any form, it has won. Undoubtedly, there would be strong threats from President Trump that any attempt by Iran to reconstitute its nuclear or missile programs, or to continue its support to its terrorist proxies, or to again close the Strait will be met with severe military responses. But those threats remain credible only as long as President Trump remains in office.

With the next Democrat president, U.S. policy will almost certainly revert to appeasement, the same mistaken policies that created the situation that President Trump inherited from his predecessor. In time, and likely not much time, the regime will be able to reconstitute its ballistic missile and drone force and its other military capabilities. It will be able to rebuild its terrorist proxies, and it will resume its 47-year war against the Great Satan.

At home, it will continue its brutal repression with even more thousands of arrests, torture and executions. There will be two important differences based on the lessons of its military defeat. First, Iran must have a nuclear weapon to deter future attacks, to coerce its neighbors, and to prevent adversaries from encouraging and supporting its people to overthrow the regime. And second, it can use its new power to disrupt the global economy. Both are in the very DNA of the regime's leaders, both dead and alive.

The most important question is whether President Trump will finish the job of ending the regime after all the military objectives have been met. For the president, this has rightly never been about regime change by invasion and occupation. Also rightly, he has called for regime change by the Iranian people, the first and foremost victims of the regime.

But revolutions are messy things and seldom unfold in a single predictable direction. They most often take time and sacrifice. While there are signs of the regime fracturing, the full-scale uprising such as witnessed in January when over 30,000 demonstrators were murdered has not yet occurred, perhaps because of the intensity of the bombing. But we know most of the Iranian people want freedom and democracy and are ready to pay the price. Will the United States have the patience and resolve to support them, and thereby achieve our most important national security goals, or will we face the same religious dictatorship in the future, more determined to kill Americans and armed with nuclear weapons?

Both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz observed that wars are won or lost based on military prowess and the resolve of leadership. There is no question that the United States has the advantage in capability. Who has the advantage in resolve is yet to be determined.

Joseph DeTrani

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For the past 47 years, Iran has killed Americans, Iranians and others, while pursuing a nuclear weapons program and building ballistic missiles to deliver nuclear and conventional weapons, all without consequences. Iran viewed the United States for these 47 years as a paper tiger.

Iran killed Americans—and others: In April 1983, Iran, working with its proxy Hezbollah, blew up the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63, of which 17 were Americans. In October 1983, Iran trained and financed the bombing of the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut, killing 241 Americans and 58 French paratroopers. In June 1996, Iran financed and trained terrorists who bombed the U.S. Air Force housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia killing 19 and injuring over one hundred. Sanctions were imposed that Iran skirted. There were no other consequences.

Iran killed thousands of its own citizens: The 2009 Green Movement with over 100 killed; the 2022 brutal killing of Mahsa Amini for wearing her head scarf improperly, inciting

demonstrations that killed 478 in the “Women, Life, Liberty” protests; and the February 2026 protests demanding an end to clerical rule and economic distress for the people, with the regime killing over 30,000 protesters.

Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons until 2003, according to a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate. That expertise, however, remained in an Iran that was enriching uranium at the 20 percent level and, recently, at the 60 percent purity level, weeks away from the 90 percent level required for nuclear weapons. Moreover, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement with Iran simply delayed the program, conceding that Iran would eventually be permitted to fabricate nuclear weapons. Moreover, through the years, IAEA monitors were denied access to suspect nuclear sites in Iran—at Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan.

Iran had an impressive ballistic missile program. Decades ago, Iran received short-range SCUD ballistic missiles and technology from North Korea. Over the years, their short- and medium-range missiles have developed into a potent and sophisticated arsenal of missiles that can target the region and parts of Western Europe. Said missiles use solid fuel, hypersonics, and advanced guidance capabilities. Iran is also working on their long-range missiles that can target the United States and Europe.

Finally, after 47 years, the United States and Israel attacked Iran's nuclear sites in June 2025—at Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan. And in February 2026, the United States and Israel attacked the whole of Iran, in an effort to remove an evil leadership that killed Americans, Iranians and others, while pursuing nuclear weapons—to destroy Israel and the United States—and ballistic missiles to deliver these weapons of mass destruction.

The United States and Israel should persist with the war until a new government is installed in Tehran that eschews terrorism, ceases to pursue nuclear weapons, and ends its ballistic missile programs—a government that cares for the Iranian people.

Shmuel Bar

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The main “domestic event” of the Iranian theatre is the death and replacement of the leaders who were killed in the first bombings of the war and in subsequent actions. The formal constitutional process stipulated that a new Supreme Leader is appointed by the Experts Council and until then the country is managed temporarily by a “triumvirate” which consists of the president (Masoud Pezeshkian); the chief justice of the Supreme Court (Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei); and a member of the Guardian Council (Ayatollah Alireza Araf). None of these, though, truly represent “kingmakers”; they are formal rubber stamps for the decisions made by the real “kingmakers”—the IRGC.

The election of Ali Khamenei's son Mojtaba Khamenei as successor (March 8) may not have been the "election" of a live and functioning person, or the decision of factions in the IRGC who chose to appoint a "virtual" Supreme Leader, under whose "auspices" they could manage the country. Aside from the fact that he may be not alive or not functioning, his candidacy as successor was, in the past, handicapped by the fact that the very idea of a father-son succession (reminiscent of a "monarchial" Shah-like system) was anathema to both the religious elite and the ideologically "orthodox" elements in the IRGC. However, Mojtaba Khamenei was closely affiliated with major elements in the IRGC, which are the more aggressive and militarily activist of the organization. His "election", therefore, reflected the upper hand of that faction.

The Iranian regime, therefore, has metamorphosed from leadership by "Islamic-credentialed" clerics to a classic "praetorian regime" ruled by military officers and guided by their own organizational and economic interests. The IRGC predominance guides Iran away from some level of practical prudence and religious constraints that restrained Ali Khamenei towards a more radical and confrontational "Iranian Nationalist" approach. The willingness to "break the rules" and to confront the Arab Gulf states, much of the Muslim world and Europe may be linked to this shift. This faction will view concessions to the current U.S. demands (nuclear, missiles, proxies, Hormuz, subversion, terrorism) as unacceptable "capitulation." Moreover, the fact that the regime decided to ignore all its traditional constraints in regard to its neighbours demonstrates how it views the current war as a true "Armageddon" for its very existence.

Along with the "virtual" Supreme Leader, additional figures have emerged as "negotiators" with the United States. The two main figures are Majles Speaker, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and the new head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Mohammad Baqer Zolghadr. Both are IRGC veterans and hardliners and may have played an important role in the "election" of Mojtaba Khamenei as Supreme Leader. The source of their authority to hold these negotiations, though, is not clear. They, of course, claim to have their authority from the new "Supreme Leader" but in order to make any strategic decisions, need the agreement of the key figures in the IRGC leadership. The extent of their authority to make concessions therefore may vary according to the balance of power in the struggle between the different IRGC factions and between themselves. The decision after the 12-Day War to adopt a "Mosaic doctrine" that allows local commanders and units freedom of operation will also make any agreement difficult to enforce.

The Iranian domestic theatre remains dormant until the end of the actual bombing. This reflects mainly the natural "instinct" of civilians to keep out of war zones (and streets) during hostilities. In the light of the weakening of the IRGC and Basij forces, and the interests of the Arab Gulf states to weaken the current Iranian regime even more, the local opposition and ethnic elements (Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, Arabs) are likely to take advantage of the situation. The economic situation and the massive killing of civilians are likely to precipitate this. The regime will further focus on survival, extreme means, and could precipitate a new crisis. The possibility that Iran will tear at the seams is not far-fetched. Even countries that have been ruled centrally for ages have fallen apart. In any case, no matter what President Trump

decides in the short range, the war has created a fundamental change in the region. If the United States neutralizes the Iranian threat, it will have enhanced its position in the region and, due to its control over the export of oil from the Arab (no longer Persian) Gulf, will have new leverage over China, leaving Russia, again, a “superpower” with no “super powers” to aid its valuable allies.

Ilan Berman

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As the Iran conflict has progressed, a great deal of speculation has taken hold both in Washington and beyond. One pervasive narrative has been that the Iranian regime is winning, and that the United States should pack up and go home. That conclusion, though fundamentally flawed, is rooted in a key political question that as yet remains unanswered by the Trump Administration: what, precisely, is its “theory of victory”?

At the operational level, the military plans outlined by officials like CENTCOM Commander Adm. Brad Cooper are comprehensive, systematic and progressing well. However, at the political level, the end state of the conflict remains considerably murkier as a result of erratic official messaging. That tension helps explain the degree of turbulence we have all observed in the media environment in recent weeks.

Defining an acceptable end state, though, depends on several variables.

The first is the need to situate the current conflict within a proper global context. There is a persistent temptation to understand the Iran war as a strictly bilateral affair. However, it is not, because recent years have seen a clear convergence between Iran and other members of what has been called the “axis of upheaval,” including the Communist Party of China, Vladimir Putin’s Russia, the Kim dynasty in North Korea, and (until recently) the Maduro regime in Venezuela. These actors have been cooperating extensively across multiple domains in recent years, ranging from economic coordination to military exercises to disinformation. Current developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and the disposition of the Iranian regime writ large, therefore have a direct bearing on the cohesiveness of this broader axis.

In Washington, there has been a heated debate in recent months regarding this construct. Some have argued that the contemporary threats posed by Russia, China and Iran represent distinct problem sets that should be addressed separately. However, recent developments (such as the ouster of Venezuelan strongman Nicolas Maduro) suggest that where it matters, in the Oval Office itself, there is an emerging view that these threats should be addressed as part of a cohesive whole. This, in turn, has implications for how success is defined in the context of Iran—because the U.S. campaign will need to be prosecuted in a way that diminishes not only Iran but the Islamic Republic’s strategic partners as well.

The second variable is the Iranian opposition. The Iranian opposition “wave” is highly varied, and can be understood to be made up of two wings: an internal opposition that has

engaged in cycles of protest with increasing frequency, and an external opposition consisting of more organized groups, including the NCRI and supporters of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi. For both, however, the present moment is “do or die.” There may indeed be a signal for the Iranian people to come out and reclaim their country in coming days, as President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu have pledged. However, there remains the possibility that such mobilization does not occur at all—or doesn’t take place in sufficient fashion to change the situation on the ground in a fundamental way. This, in turn, would lead the United States to conclude that it has no alternative but to hammer out a deal with the remnants of the current regime in Tehran.

The third variable is the extent to which the conflict constitutes an information war. Iran, with assistance from its strategic partners in Moscow and Beijing, has demonstrated the capacity to isolate its domestic population from the outside world, as well as to significantly manipulate perceptions in the West. This has had the effect of eroding the appetite for continued conflict among publics in Europe and the United States. The contemporary media environment, characterized by immediacy and impatience, only serves to reinforce this dynamic, with major effects. Expectations of rapid results could contribute to declining support for sustained military operations—something that only benefits Iran and its allies.

The fourth variable concerns the range of possible outcomes to the current conflict. The optimal one, from the U.S. standpoint, would involve a fundamentally changed Iran that transitions back to being a reliable American ally (as the country was pre-1979). However, a range of political and economic factors—including domestic electoral considerations and the influence of energy markets—may result in movement by the Trump Administration toward a tactical compromise with a residual regime before that happens. Such an outcome, in turn, would leave the current regime intact without fundamental change, despite indications that a significant portion of the Iranian population opposes the Islamic Republic.

This scenario would generate two dynamics. First, it would greatly increase the likelihood of future cycles of protest—since a military regime run by the IRGC or some other remnant of the Islamic Republic would be rejected by the population at large. Second, it would create incentives for the United States to make concessions to Tehran, because the regime is cognizant of its lack of legitimacy at home and therefore will naturally seek to reinforce its position vis-à-vis its domestic population. Indeed, this dynamic is reflected in the Iranian government’s current, maximalist demands toward the United States.

At the same time, Iran has pursued an external strategy of applying pressure to American allies in the Gulf in an effort to influence the scope of military operations. This approach has proven to be a double-edged sword, however. Rather than constraining U.S. freedom of action, it has contributed to increasing pressure on it from regional governments, including Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, to further dismantle and degrade the Iranian regime.

This dynamic underscores the importance of erecting a durable assurance architecture in the region. Prior discussions of a Middle East Security Alliance (MESA), as well as a Middle East Missile Defense Alliance, reflected recognition on the part of past administrations that America’s Mideast partners face continued direct exposure to the Iranian threat. These

efforts, however, have remained mostly conceptual in nature. What is needed now, therefore, is greater focus on the part of the United States on things like integrated air defenses and stepped-up maritime security arrangements. The stakes here are high. The manner in which the conflict concludes, particularly if the regime remains intact in some form, will have significant implications for both the regional threat environment and the durability of America's alliance structure in the region.

In this sense, the conflict should be understood not only in terms of its immediate objectives, but also in terms of its broader implications for global competition and regional order.
