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# The War on Iran

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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The Iranian Studies Unit

The Iranian Studies Unit (ISU) was established by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in March 2020, as a specialized platform providing in-depth study and analysis of Iran and its relationship with the Arab world. It was founded in response to the lack of specialized academic research on Iran in the region, which has led to widespread misconceptions, built on largely ideological or politicized and sometimes contradictory opinions – be they pro or anti Iran.

The ISU provides political analyses and strategic briefings related to developments in Iran, while monitoring the publications of other units on the topic. It also aims to establish a database for all analyses, facts, and statistical data on Iran published worldwide, and make them available to specialized researchers and people interested in Iranian affairs.

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On February 28, 2026, after months of tension and speculation, Israel and the United States jointly attacked Iran. The attacks started with a bombardment of the compound of the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and widespread attacks across Tehran and the rest of the country. Iran's response came within an hour, with Iranian missiles being fired toward Tel Aviv, Haifa, and other Israeli targets. Before long, as Tehran had repeatedly promised, American military bases in neighboring countries, most notably in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, were also targeted by Iranian missiles.

This was the second time in less than a year that the US and Israel attacked Iran. The first time, in June 2025, in what came to be known as the Twelve-Day War, Iran's response was limited to Israel, with only one attack on the regional headquarters of the American Central Command, located at the Al Udaid base in Qatar. This time, Iran's response was fast and seemingly furious, surprising in its geographic scale, spread from the north in Kuwait to the south in Oman. A naval port in Bahrain used by the American navy and a hotel in Manama reportedly used by US military personnel were hit, as were the international airports of Kuwait City and Dubai, the emirate's iconic Burj Al-Arab Hotel and its Jebel Ali Port, along with multiple sites in Abu Dhabi, and of course the CentCom HQ in Al Udaid. Iran itself, meanwhile, was bombed by the US and Israel seemingly at will, its air force nonexistent and its air defenses not much better. As of this writing, the war is continuing with no end in sight. Iran is bombed day and night by the Americans and the Israelis, and Iran shoots missiles at Israel and at American naval ships. The rest of the region watches pensively, occasionally intercepting attacking Iranian drones and missiles.

Few can claim to have been surprised by the war. For months, the Iranian government claimed to be anticipating it. Trump, never shy to be boastful, often threatened that if Iran did not accede to his demands, which often shifted from one press conference to another, the full might of the US military would be brought to bear upon it. And the Israeli prime minister's intentions had been obvious for many years, most recently during the Twelve-Day War, when he sought to inflict not just military defeat on Iran but to foster chaos and fragmentation across the country. In that war, one of Israel's most intense bombing campaigns had focused on Tehran's central prison, whereby Netanyahu had hoped that escaped prisoners would wreak havoc and bring about the Islamic Republic's collapse. When the war ended, the job was unfinished as far as Israel was concerned. For Israel, nothing short of the toppling of the Islamic Republic would do. Hence the latest attack.

## Iran's Response to the War

Not unlike the Twelve-Day War, the Islamic Republic sees the current war as an existential threat. Therefore, escalation is seen as a viable option in order to ensure that as many US assets as possible are hit and damaged, if not altogether destroyed, and in as many places around Iran as possible. This accounts for frequent attacks on US-related targets and locations around the Gulf, notably in the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar.



An additional motivation behind Iranian attacks is due to the make-up of the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards. The Islamic Republic now has a younger, more radical generation of officers commanding its Revolutionary Guards, and they are keen to prove to Israel, the US, and the Arab states of the Gulf that assumptions about Iran's military weakness are misguided. For them, simply resisting simultaneous attacks by two nuclear powers, Israel and the United States, is considered victory. Inflicting casualties on the two attackers is a sign of additional strength.

Iran's military strategy during the war appears to have quickly evolved. At first preoccupied with self-defense, within days it appears to have shifted to wreaking havoc across multiple national boundaries in order to spread its own pain to as many of America's friends as possible. A few days after the war's start, Iran began targeting oil and gas installations in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, its supposed erstwhile friend, presumably to disrupt global commerce and the international economy. Iran's meek attacks were repelled this time. But one successful hit can have devastating global consequences.

Wars are easy to start, but notoriously difficult to end. Israel's strategy has always been clear, namely to effect regime change, dismantle Iran's missile arsenal, sow discord and chaos across the country, and to encourage the country's different ethnic communities to seek autonomy. The United States for its part appears to have no clear strategy or end goal other than to go to war with Iran. American objectives for declaring victory and exiting are, for now, nonexistent.

## Life of the Islamic Republic

The course of the war and its outcome depend largely on how Iran responds, or, more accurately, how long it is capable of responding. Over the last forty-seven years, the Islamic Republic has proven to be its own worst enemy. What was once a robust hybrid authoritarian system, allowing the public a semblance of political participation through elections and ballots while stifling dissent of any kind, has in recent years become only authoritarian. The 2021 presidential elections, for example, were widely considered to have been "engineered" in order to produce a specific result, namely the election of the cleric Ebrahim Raisi, widely viewed as a potential successor to Khamenei. When Raisi's death in a helicopter crash in 2024 was followed by the surprise election of the reformist Masoud Pezeshkian, the new president spent most of his time bemoaning his powerlessness in a political system the public sees as rotten to the core.

Simultaneously, popular protests, once a regular feature of the country's political landscape, have become increasingly more frequent. They have also become more intense and more violent, resulting in ever greater numbers of casualties and arrests. In the latest round of protests, which unfolded over a week last December and January, the authorities reportedly killed more than 7,000 of the protestors. Hundreds more were arrested. Chants of "death to the dictator," once unheard of even in the most intense anti-government protests, have now become common slogans of even casual passers-by in the streets of Tehran and other cities.

Soon after the most recent crackdown, street cleaners busily washed off bloodstains that had turned street asphalts red. But the hands of the Islamic Republic will still forever be stained with the blood of its citizens. How many of these citizens will come to the system's rescue while it is at war, and when its diminishing reservoir of popular goodwill will be completely depleted, remain to be seen.

For his part, Khamenei has left behind a nation highly polarized. The Islamic Republic's unique system of theocracy is meant to inspire religious obedience and loyalty to a supreme religious authority, a *velayat-e faqih*, a position that Khamenei occupied for no less than thirty-seven years. But all along Khamenei remained a relic of the past, stubbornly refusing to change with the times or to keep up with the revolution's evolution. While the revolution's memory and its early slogans faded, he kept using them as guidelines in his speeches and edicts until the bitter end. Iranian society changed, became younger, less conservative and traditional, more attuned to the trends elsewhere in the world, and yet Khamenei and his ideas aged, inching ever deeper into ideological and theological conservatism. When women demanded the freedom to dress as they wanted, he demanded they keep wearing the hijab. When his own loyal lieutenants called for reforms and moderation, he called them traitors and guilty of treason. As the world became more interconnected and intertwined, he held on to policies that kept Iran isolated and marginal. When he was killed, some Iranians cried. But many danced in joy. A much bigger majority remain anxious, relieved that the dictator is gone but weary that another will replace him.

And that – yet another dictator – may be precisely what awaits Iranians. A likely scenario is for such a caudillo to emerge from the ashes of what is left of the Islamic Republic. There is no shortage of men in the republic's deep state, with the connections and the experience to hold onto the levers of power at a critical juncture like this. Another scenario, this one also involving a dictatorship, is for the foreign-based opposition, now increasingly headed by the son of the former Shah, the sixty-four-year-old Reza Pahlavi, to be installed by the US and Israel as heirs of a supposedly new Iran. Pahlavi's supporters, egged on by Israeli bots and carrying Israeli flags, were the ones who danced the hardest in the streets of Toronto and Los Angeles as news of Khamenei's killing spread. These club-hopping revolutionaries have proven themselves to be every bit as intolerant of dissent, even of discussion, as their counterparts in the Khameneist camp. Already, with social media as their weapon of choice, they are busily tearing down opponents, shutting down critical discourse, and accusing anyone not in their camp of being in the pay of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei's intolerance during his lifetime has left a legacy of polarization in the fractured society he left behind. His successors, regardless of where they may come from or what their background may be, are unlikely to be much different from him in their disdain for others with different views.

## History's Judgement

Only days into it, predicting the course of events to come in Iran and the wider region is impossible for now. If there is any certainty it is that much peril still lies ahead. Drawing on some historical



lessons is productive, however. History is replete with examples of greater powers attacking and invading lesser ones, though almost always to their own peril. Whether the United States and Vietnam or the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, or the US and Iraq or Russia and Ukraine, attacks by greater powers have always caused major damage and destruction to life and property, destroying lives and perpetuating animosity for generations to come. But they have almost never, certainly not in the cases mentioned here, led to the sort of victory that the aggressors envisioned. George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" fiasco rings true for countless examples before and since. The US-Israeli attack on Iran will be no exception.

Already, nonetheless, certain important lessons can be drawn. To begin with, international law is dead. If it is not completely dead yet, it is certainly on life-support. Only within the last few years, we have witnessed the horrors of a genocide in Gaza as self-declared bastions of the rule of law, countries like Germany, Britain, France, and the United States, cheered it on and actively aided it, all the while decrying Russia's violation of international law in its invasion of Ukraine. The crimes being committed toward Iran today are much less egregious than the genocide of Palestinians, but the cheerleaders are no less enthusiastic and double-faced as they were before.

Equally compelling is the lesson of America's declining global standing. Empires rule through military might and the yearning by others to become like them. The latter phenomenon, "soft power" in contemporary parlance, rest in more than the consumption of cultural products. American and European soft power lies in more than seeking products and labels produced in their territories. An important component of it is moral authority, abiding by and upholding what is generally considered good and avoiding evil. Imperial decline, inversely, is all too-often preceded first by the erosion of the very values once buttressing the system. Only then do institutional atrophy and military decline follow. The jury is still out as to whether the American empire is on the decline. But Donald Trump's foreign policy, and Trumpism in general, are doing their level best to jumpstart and perhaps to expedite it.

Historians will remember this latest war as a major turning point in the political history of Iran, Israel, the Middle East, and the United States. Decades from now, books and articles will write about how America's imperial ambitions were once again laid bare by the Trump administration in the 2020s, how Israel and the United States attacked a country calling itself the Islamic Republic in the holy month of Ramadan, and how a region so chronically torn by war and conflict was once again pulled away from the cusp of tranquility and thrown into chaos. What is transpiring today is indeed history in the making. And, as history so often is, it is being written with tragedy and blood.