

# The U.S.-Iran Conflict

## What Comes Next?

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In the current conflict with Iran, the primary goal for the United States should be limited to destroying, or at least severely setting back, Iran's nuclear program and ensuring that Iran cannot rebuild in the future.
- The United States should not expand its goals to address all forms of noxious Iranian behavior. The more ambitious the goals, the more U.S. troops and resources Washington would need to commit to the conflict to ensure its success, and even then, the chances of failure are high.
- A ceasefire is an important first step, but the United States must work with Israel, regional allies, and other powerful states to shape any final deal. The threat of continued force—U.S. as well as Israeli—must remain on the table.

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Israeli military launched Operation Rising Lion on June 13, targeting Iranian nuclear facilities (including the main nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz), military bases, and missile program infrastructure. Israel also assassinated military leaders and nuclear scientists. On June 22, the United States joined the conflict, bombing several nuclear sites. The main target, Fordow—an underground facility that housed important components of Iran's nuclear program—is particularly hard to strike as it was built inside a mountain to guard infrastructure against air attacks. The stated goal of the U.S. operation was to destroy, or at least severely set back, Iran's nuclear program, although President Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and other leaders have at times mentioned more expansive goals such as regime change.

Israel attacked for a mix of political and strategic reasons, including Iran's weakened ability to respond. Israel had previously devastated Iran's most important proxy force, the Lebanese Hezbollah.

In response to the U.S. strikes, Iran retaliated by launching short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles against the U.S. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Tehran warned the strike was coming, probably to avoid escalation yet demonstrate to its own people the regime's defiance to Israeli and U.S. attacks, and all the missiles were intercepted. Iran knows that it cannot match Israel blow for blow, let alone the United States, and Tehran has long had a healthy respect for U.S. military power. Iran stated that its response was "mighty and successful," signaling that the response was sufficient and a desire to de-escalate. As of the morning of June 24, there was a ceasefire on paper, with both Israel and Iran continuing attacks, nonetheless.

### LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Congress can play an important role in supporting a ceasefire while bolstering, but also limiting, the Trump administration's negotiating leverage. Congressional leaders should clarify that U.S. goals are limited, that a genuine offer from Tehran to verifiably end its nuclear program will be accepted, and that a failure of Iran to do so will be met with continued force.

The conflict revealed a shortage of Israeli Arrow interceptors, and the United States has positioned U.S. Navy destroyers with a range of interceptors (SM-2, SM-3, and SM-6) and replenished interceptors for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) antimissile systems—creating concerns that the United States is burning through its own stockpiles. Spending to improve U.S. capacity to rapidly produce scarce munitions is necessary both for Middle East contingencies and for operations potentially involving Russia and China.

## CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The United States should prepare for additional military retaliation by Iran. Before the U.S. attack, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, already warned that there would be "irreparable damage" in response, and U.S. forces and personnel in Iraq, as well as elsewhere in the Middle East, could come under fire. For now, Iran does not seem to seek escalation with the United States. However, misperception in general and any future U.S. attacks could lead Iran to additional attacks against U.S. bases in the region and, unlike the attack in Qatar, do so with no warning.

There is also the risk that Iran will engage in state-sponsored terrorism, even months or years after the war ends. Iran, working with Hezbollah, has attacked U.S., Jewish, and Israeli targets in Argentina, Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. Tehran has also struck against U.S. Arab allies and plotted to kill U.S. officials, including President Trump.

An even bigger risk involves a rush toward nuclear proliferation after the shooting stops. Iran might redouble its weaponization efforts, withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and developing a clandestine nuclear program outside of arms control commitments and international inspections. Monitoring such a program is possible, and Israel has proved it has excellent intelligence, but it can be difficult to be sure that all weaponization activities are being tracked.

While it currently appears unlikely, the United States should prepare for Iran to cut the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. This, however, would be an extreme response and counterproductive for Iran's oil shipments.

Another challenge for the United States is the expense of war. The U.S. intervention against the Houthis in Yemen cost more than \$1 billion, and an Iranian operation would be far more extensive and expensive. U.S. military resources are limited, and an intervention in the Middle East will divert military assets from Asia (and countering China).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States must make clear that its objective is to destroy Iran's nuclear capacity—not to pursue regime change. There is currently no viable Iranian opposition capable of assuming power, and any externally driven regime change would likely fail. Pursuing a regime change would require far more resources, including ground troops, and would carry a high risk of failure.
- The United States should encourage both sides to adhere to a ceasefire and move to a lasting agreement that ends Iran's nuclear program. A deal should include halting future uranium enrichment, extensive monitoring provisions, and punishments for violations. It should also bring in U.S. regional allies.
- The United States should prepare for an increase in state-sponsored terrorism by Iran, even months or years later, by ensuring U.S. counterterrorism organizations have sufficient funding and resources. Iran should be repeatedly warned that any attacks would be regarded as a violation of the ceasefire and subject to a strong U.S. response, including the use of military force.
- In the long term, the United States, along with Israeli intelligence, should continue to monitor Iran's potential to establish a covert nuclear program. The threat of continued military action against such a program may deter its establishment.

## Additional Resources

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