



Political and
Geostrategic
OBSERVATORY
of the United States

WHERE TRUMP'S WAR IN IRAN MIGHT BE HEADING

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The US war on Iran is, thus far, consistent with how Donald Trump has used the military during his now more than five years in the White House. While he has not hesitated much to engage in quick operations including air strikes, piracy and abduction of heads of state, Trump has been considerably more reluctant to put significant numbers of troops in harm's way or to embark on forever wars. That approach was central to his appeal to voters in 2024- and is going to be tested in Iran.

The regime that Trump is seeking to topple is indeed a very brutal one. In addition to its decade-long history of repressing the Iranian people and supporting terror networks, this year alone the Iranian regime has killed roughly 35,000¹ of its own people who were engaged in widespread and peaceful protests. To put that in perspective, that is roughly half the number of people who have been killed by Israel since the war in Gaza began in October of 2023.

Nobody should be shedding a tear if this Iranian regime is definitively out of power-I certainly will not, but this war is not quite that simple. Trump's actions in starting this massive bombing campaign with no plan, no strategy and no discussion with allies is all but certain to lead to death, disease and impoverishment for many Iranians, increased instability in the region, an empowered regime in Israel that is currently run by messianic extremists, and perhaps a much larger war in the Middle East.

It is far too early to know where this conflict with Iran will lead and may take decades to get a clear answer to that question, but it is increasingly clear, and altogether unsurprising, that the Trump administration has neither a plan nor any real idea about what to do next, other than continue to bomb for a few more days, or perhaps weeks.

Accordingly, it may be useful to explore three broad scenarios for what may happen in the short and medium range future. The first, and by far least likely scenario, is that the regime collapses and the Iranian people agree upon an interim leader and embark a brief and successful path to becoming a liberal democracy that poses no threat to any other state in the region and stops funding and supporting terrorist organizations.

This may seem like an extremely far-fetched scenario, but it is not impossible. It is also not impossible that with Opening Day of the baseball season only a few weeks away, Buster Posey will call to tell me the Giants need another left-handed pitcher and sign me to a big-league contract, but I am not quitting my teaching job any time soon.

¹ Kay Armin Serjoie, Roxana Saberi, and Fatemeh Jamalpour, "Iran Protest Death Toll Could Top 30,000, According to Local Health Officials," *Time*, 25 January 2026, <https://time.com/7357635/more-than-30000-killed-in-iran-say-senior-officials/>

The remaining major scenarios are not quite as rosy. The second, and far more likely, direction this goes is that after a few more days or weeks of bombing, Trump gets bored, frustrated or something else, decides not to expand the war and instead ceases the bombing campaign, declares victory and forgets about Iran. If that happens the Iranian regime could reconsolidate, albeit at first in a much weaker form, crack down even more intensely on dissidents and slowly rebuild its pre-war strength.

Another related third scenario is that the regime is unable to reconsolidate after the bombing stops and the country quickly descend into civil conflict and violence. This would lead to more Iranians dying through conflict and likely greater economic collapse that would be accompanied by public health crises and migration from the country. These twin crises, in turn, would put increased pressure on neighboring countries, and there is some recent precedent for public health crises to spread beyond the borders of any one country.

A fourth scenario that cannot be ruled out is that Trump will expand the US role in this war and decide to send troops to Iran. The mission there could take a range of forms, from capturing or killing more leaders of the regime to a longer-term regime change effort. Notably, if a longer US involvement in Iran ends up taking the latter form it will do so without the people and institutions in and around the US government who have the best sense of how to do this because Trump defunded United States Agency for International Development (USAID) early in 2025.

Endeavoring to consolidate a new regime that could unify and govern Iran, a country of 90 million people, would be an extremely costly and time-consuming project, one better measured in decades than months, in other words, another forever war. Moreover, regardless of the scope and nature of the commitment, this would be an extremely difficult task that would most likely lead to ongoing instability in Iran and the region, large numbers of US casualties, much larger numbers of Iranian deaths and, at best, a very weak new Iranian regime that would require support not just from the US, but from other countries as well.

It would also be a mistake to overlook the impact this war will have on the domestic politics of the US. The Trump regime will likely use this war as a means to further suppress dissent, at times violently, and accelerate the activities of the new American Gestapo known as ICE.

It is very likely that because of the war the price of oil, and because of that virtually everything, will continue to increase, leading the Trump regime to be less popular, but still willing to do whatever is necessary to stay in power. We can also expect a rise in Islamophobia because Iran is a Muslim country, and antisemitism because anti-war forces on the left and right will,

not without reason, blame Israel and therefore, for no legitimate reason, American Jews regardless of their views on the Middle East.

Determining the worst thing Trump has done is always a bit of a mug's game because the real answer is always that it hasn't yet, but starting this war is certainly among the most harmful decisions this disturbed, erratic and fascistic man-child has made.

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