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Killing the Leader, Not the Regime: The Limits of Decapitation in US Foreign Policy

By Suruchi Rajan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On February 28th, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a joint military campaign against Iran, following several months of the Pentagon's largest military buildup in the Middle East since the Iraq War. On the first day of the war, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, was assassinated, along with several other high-ranking state officials. The Trump administration's objectives have shifted both prior to and during the operation, oscillating between targeting Iran's nuclear machinery, destroying its conventional ballistic missile program, and "liberating" the Iranian people. Following the strike, President Trump has repeatedly expressed support for regime change and indicated that the United States should play a role in selecting Iran's next leader. In truth, the administration is emboldened by the military success of last summer's Twelve-Day War and the recent capture of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. Thus, U.S. interests are another affair entirely – the Trump administration is committed to pursuing regime management in Iran, using military force to destroy Iranian retaliatory capabilities and force concessions. Despite the tentative ceasefire, the decapitation strikes have set political and strategic dynamics in motion that will be difficult to shake. Thus, this strategy raises two critical questions: what are the consequences of targeting Iran's leadership and are the administration's goals achievable in Iran?

Historical and theoretical evidence, along with early signs of Iranian response, suggest state consolidation and economic retaliation that are only adverse to American interests in the region. Regimes characterized by strong institutions, cohesive elites, and nationalist legitimacy often survive leadership assassinations. Iran possesses all three features, not only suggesting that regime management is unlikely, but the United States also risks drawing itself into a prolonged conflict while generating larger strategic problems. Rather than engaging in an unnecessary and costly war, the United States should adopt a strategy of strategic restraint toward Iran,

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prioritizing sanctions relief, offshoring balancing, and nuclear diplomacy over policies that may strengthen the Islamic Republic.

The Road to February 28th

The first year of the Trump administration's foreign policy has been defined by aggressive action against adversarial states that possess weak positional power. Two countries have felt the brunt of this approach: Iran and Venezuela.

The United States and Israel launched a joint aerial campaign against Iran's nuclear infrastructure last June, targeting Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. When Israel could not reach Iran's underground enrichment sites, the United States intervened directly. Israel also conducted targeted assassinations of high-ranking Iranian military officials and nuclear scientists on the first day. Narrow targets made the war's objective clear – destroy Iranian nuclear capacity. The conflict successfully remained constrained; Iran's retaliation was limited, U.S. bases sustained some damage, and President Trump declared victory, walking away with a hubris that followed him into the next year.

In the first days of 2026, U.S. forces conducted an overnight raid in Venezuela, removing President Nicolás Maduro and killing dozens of security and military officials. Acting President Delcy Rodríguez quickly cooperated with Washington's demands. The operation was quick and cost little, resulting in no U.S. casualties, minimal civilian harm, and a compliant replacement as the country's leader. This outcome convinced Trump that decisive, targeted action could rapidly reshape hostile governments. Weeks later, he turned his attention back to Iran.

A wave of nationwide protests swept Iran in early 2026, driven by economic deterioration from years of U.S. sanctions. A violent government crackdown followed, resulting in thousands of deaths. Trump expressed vocal support for the protestors and issued direct threats against Iranian authorities, while the United States repositioned air, naval, and missile assets across the Middle East. These moves were clear signals of an impending intervention.

On February 28th, 2026, American and Israeli forces struck. As top Iranian officials convened in Tehran, long-range missiles struck the government compound

and achieved complete tactical surprise. The strikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who held power for nearly 37 years, along with the IRGC's commander in chief, the head of the National Defense Council, the defense minister, and dozens of other senior figures.¹ These decapitation strikes defined the war's opening day, signaling that the United States and Israel intended to assert their dominance over the nation and destabilize the Iranian state.

President Trump has expressed varying motivations for pursuing a war with Iran. Early in the conflict, he stated that the United States must have a role in selecting Iran's next leader to avoid "go[ing] back every five years and do this again and again," drawing explicit parallels to Maduro's removal and Rodríguez's subsequent cooperation.² While Trump floats ideas of external regime change, his actions reveal a different strategy: regime management. This is not violence in pursuit of ideological ideals; the administration does not intend to transform an authoritarian theocracy into a liberal democracy. Multilateralism and liberal internationalism are a language of the past. The Trump doctrine intends to punch down, forcing smaller, weaker states to comply with U.S. demands. Targeted strikes aim to strip these states of their retaliatory capabilities, creating an American-friendly world order that carries out U.S. economic and military demands while leaving authoritarian structures largely intact.³ In Iran, leadership decapitation was positioned as the first domino in incapacitating Iranian nuclear and missile capabilities, severing its influence over regional proxy groups, and forcing Tehran's surrender to U.S. demands. This was not intended to be a prolonged fight. President Trump assumed the conflict would be swift, a belief reinforced by the outcomes in Venezuela and Iran a year prior.⁴

That assumption was a critical miscalculation. The Trump Administration drew a false equivalency between Venezuela and Iran, failing to anticipate how the Islamic Republic would respond to top-level decapitation. The conflict remains volatile, and developments change daily. But political theory and historical cases of leadership decapitations serve as useful predictive frameworks. They might not offer certainties, but tendencies do recur across cases. These are the lessons American officials should have studied before acting, and what policymakers must grapple with now.

While this war cannot be reduced to a single day's actions, the Trump playbook was clear: use leadership decapitation as a quick and painless strategy to force Iran's hand. Instead, the world has witnessed what ensues when a reckless and hasty tactic is applied to a long-term, structural issue.

The Theoretical Framework

Leadership decapitations and targeted assassinations have an extensive history in U.S. foreign policy, stretching from the mid-20th century into the present. With advances in aerial warfare, killing heads of states has become almost effortless; ground invasions are no longer necessary when drones can strike from thousands of miles away. This strategy is politically attractive: remove one man, and his organization falls with him. The logic seems intuitive. Organizations led by charismatic figures, whose skills are deemed vital to operational success, should be more vulnerable than other kinds of organizations.⁵ If survival depends on a single individual, targeted killings should have a spillover effect that destabilizes the entire organization. On this basis, policymakers have long argued that decapitation is an effective strategy to combat terrorism or induce regime change. This rationale deserves serious scrutiny. The presence of a charismatic leader rarely determines whether decapitation produces organizational decline, because charisma can always become institutionalized.⁶ Instead, it is important to examine an establishment in its entirety and how individuals interact within it, rather than the allure of a single individual. The literature will demonstrate that leadership decapitation is hardly decisive on its own. Its effectiveness is shaped by three variables: institutional depth, elite response, and nationalist legitimacy – the key indicators of an organization's resilience.

Institutional Depth and Leadership Vacuums

Leaders do not exist within a vacuum. Presidents and prime ministers are embedded within elaborate political, military, and social structures, often propped up by patronage networks and bureaucratic institutions. Regimes that are more deeply institutionalized find they can absorb leadership loss more easily. A group's age and size indicate institutional depth and are strong predictors of whether leadership removal succeeds. As organizations grow

larger and mature over time, they become better equipped to withstand top-level attacks. Groups active for over forty years almost never collapse following decapitation attempts, compared with a 29% success rate among groups active for less than ten years.⁷ Mature institutions develop the succession mechanisms and safety nets needed to substitute new members into key roles quickly. They also have the time to build a division of labor grounded in specialization, developing a decentralized decision-making process and a broader base of expertise that makes them especially resilient. Removing a leader does not remove the collective knowledge the state has accumulated. Institutionalized organizations do not depend on a single individual to function, let alone survive.

When leadership is removed, a vacuum will inevitably open. But the response is never uniform. Power does not simply fall to those quickest to the throne. When the existing order is destroyed, it creates space for anyone. But only those actors who are best organized, armed, and already embedded within the existing political system will succeed.⁸ These actors deploy the financial and military resources they already possess to remain in power or secure it from others. Successful actors cannot use this opportunity to build momentum from scratch – they must be existing players within the system. Equally important is the willingness of new rulers to remain indefinitely. Those who appear beholden to outside forces or lack genuine ties to the country invite continued resistance from local adversaries. Legitimacy must be earned from within.⁹ Knowledge of local politics and demonstrated loyalty to the nation create viable leaders. Foreign-installed replacements do not.

Elite Response

When leaders are assassinated, the most immediate reaction is not institutional collapse. Regime survival is determined by how the remaining ruling elite responds. Decapitation forces surviving leaders to make a choice: divide or unify.

When elites choose experimentation at moments of external pressure, they tend to fracture. Pursuing modernization reforms and steering away from the status quo creates disagreements over the path forward. Loyalty to the regime subsequently weakens, and institutions from the bureaucracy to the security apparatus fail. Cracks form at the highest levels that

prove difficult to mend, stripping the regime of its legitimacy to govern.¹⁰

Other times, elites respond to crises by choosing stability over risk-taking. They unify, defend the existing order, and survive leadership change. In these cases, not only does regime collapse become far less feasible, but the election of new leadership often shifts toward institutional hardliners. Figures are chosen to project strength against foreign enemies and ensure that another removal does not occur; violence often follows suit. As elites consolidate control, their refusal to back down or negotiate can work directly against the interests of the intervening power.

Nationalist Legitimacy

Leadership targeting by external actors often produces national backlash, from the state apparatus down to the citizenry. Political elites can weaponize the aggression of outsiders to their own advantage, deploying nationalist rhetoric to unite citizens under a common identity against a shared enemy. Rally ‘round the flag’ effects have been observed across history, producing surges in leadership approval ratings and broad public support for administrative decisions. Although ephemeral, increased patriotism and loyalty can undermine attempts at regime collapse or future escalatory action. Most consequentially, a populace who may have previously disagreed with or opposed their regime now reverses course. External aggression consolidates domestic legitimacy.

These effects extend beyond borders. Attacking a country’s leadership frequently strengthens their resolve. Decapitation is not only counterproductive but can turn lethal, as organizations intensify their retaliatory capabilities both in the frequency of attacks and the severity of resulting casualties. This response is amplified by the age and size of the targeted group.¹¹

The type of organization is another key factor. Ideological groups – those which seek a radical transformation of society through a political doctrine – are more susceptible to collapse after decapitation. Membership within these nations is not rooted in ethnic or cultural identity, and allegiance to this ideology can often transcend national borders. Moreover, influential figures often head these movements. Consequently, these regimes are more vulnerable to leadership loss. Religious organizations,

on the other hand, are far more resistant.¹² Religion can come to define a nation and anchor citizens’ sense of belonging. When faith is placed at the center of political life, divine authority supersedes any single leader. The organization endures because the belief system endures.

The case studies below illustrate how decapitation efforts produce divergent outcomes, some yielding short-term gains for American interests while others generate severe consequences almost immediately. Without a clear understanding of how decapitation affects various kinds of regimes, limited military campaigns risk expanding well beyond their original intentions. The three variables examined here – institutional depth, elite response, and nationalist legitimacy – provide the analytical foundation for assessing the effects of decapitation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Iran.

Historical Evidence: Past Cases of Leadership Decapitation

Decapitation has long served as standard U.S. strategy – in warfare, regime change, and counterterrorism policy. Its track record, however, has been poor. Japan and Germany are typically invoked as success stories: decades of fascist rule were dismantled, democratic transitions followed, and durable U.S. alliances emerged. But these are exceptions, not models. Countries with favorable preconditions for democracy – those with high income, homogeneous populations, and strong bureaucratic institutions – tend to succeed when external interventions occur.¹³ Most U.S. targets lack these conditions. The four cases below illustrate what transpires when decapitation is applied without them.

Iraq

The 2003 invasion of Iraq offers the clearest lesson in what happens when a regime is dismantled from the top down without accounting for the resulting vacuum. U.S. forces seized Baghdad, toppled the Ba’athist regime, and captured Saddam Hussein all within the first months of the campaign.¹⁴ The military campaign achieved its immediate objectives. However, what followed was a catastrophe of post-war planning.

The U.S.-led interim government dissolved the ruling Ba’ath Party, purging senior officials across every

government ministry, including those who managed schools, hospitals, and public infrastructure. The Iraqi security forces were disbanded without disarming soldiers, leaving hundreds of thousands of armed, unemployed men who held deep resentment toward their occupiers and had no stake in the new order.¹⁵ L. Paul Bremer, an American with no experience in Iraq, was placed in charge of the transitional government. The administration lacked both the local knowledge and the legitimacy to govern.

Iran spent two decades preparing for this moment. Since the 1980s, Iran had been cultivating networks with Shia political parties and militias exiled during and after the Iran-Iraq War to ensure a post-Saddam Iraq could never threaten Iranian security again.¹⁶ When the United States invaded Iraq, Tehran was ready to capitalize on this new vacuum. Exiled militias possessed the organizational capacity and local legitimacy that the American occupation never had. After the United States withdrew in 2011, Iranian-backed militias only consolidated their hold, controlling large areas of the country and wielding significant political influence. Every Iraqi prime minister has had to strike an arrangement with Tehran.¹⁷ Nearly three trillion dollars and hundreds of thousands of deaths later, Iran emerged as the strategic winner of the war.¹⁸ The lesson is clear: when institutions are dismantled without a suitable replacement, the most organized, armed, and embedded actor wins – and it is rarely the one doing the dismantling.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan reinforces Iraq's lesson while adding another: external aggression consolidates internal legitimacy. Following the September 11th attacks, the Bush administration pursued the Taliban and al-Qaeda without a coherent post-war strategy, relying on local warlords, spending too few resources, and treating two distinct organizations as a single enemy.¹⁹

By December 2001, the Taliban had been pushed from its last stronghold and was prepared to negotiate its surrender. The United States vetoed the deal. The Pentagon rejected any attempt at compromise, opposing the Taliban's surrender and its integration back into Afghan society, because they falsely conflated the Taliban with al-Qaeda.²⁰ The administration demanded total eradication of a group that had not carried out the 9/11 attacks, provoking a

Taliban-led insurgency it would forever regret.

Hamid Karzai, installed as president by American officials, was systematically undermined; his decisions were overruled and his legitimacy was eroded by U.S. collaboration with Afghan warlords. Karzai fought with U.S. authorities over its aggressive military campaign, which took the shape of night raids, mass detentions, and indiscriminate air strikes that killed tens of thousands of civilians.²¹ Elites fractured, unable to agree on the decision-making process. Facing a government that failed to provide any meaningful security and an occupying force they viewed as illegitimate, Afghans eventually returned to the only organized political force they knew. The Taliban persisted and retook Kabul in 2021.

The Afghan case illustrates how external aggression can invert domestic politics. A population that might have welcomed change instead rallied against the foreign presence. Leadership decapitation without nationalist legitimacy or the organizational infrastructure to earn it produces resistance, not compliance.

Iran, 1953

The 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh offers a different model: regime management – installing a compliant leader within an existing political structure. It worked, for some time, and then produced the government the United States now finds itself at war with.

Mossadegh, a nationalist and secular democrat, had nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company to end British exploitation of Iranian oil. Britain and the United States viewed his government as a threat to Western oil interests and a potential opening for Soviet influence. Operation Ajax ensued, overthrowing Mossadegh and restoring Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah. Pahlavi ruled as an authoritarian monarch, backed by Washington and sustained by SAVAK, a secret police force that the CIA and Mossad helped train. Extensive surveillance, arbitrary arrests, press censorship, and severe torture maintained the Pahlavi regime for 26 years. Iranian grievances toward the Shah grew as repression and economic inequalities worsened. With nationalist and democratic movements suppressed, political Islam filled the void.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution can be understood as a

direct response to the coup and its aftermath. Ayatollah Khamenei, reflecting on the regime's anti-Western posture, remarked that "[they] are not liberals like Allende and Mossadegh, whom the CIA can snuff out."²² The Islamic Republic was built, institutionally and ideologically, to be resistant to exactly the kind of external interference that toppled its predecessor. Regime management only succeeded in the short-term because Iranian elites were fragmented. Power was still concentrated around a single monarch, which was an inherently fragile arrangement. The Republic that replaced the Shah was designed never to make the same mistake.

Venezuela

Venezuela appeared to validate the Trump administration's theory of quick, targeted leadership change. But the conditions that made Venezuela vulnerable are those that Iran does not share. This is the danger of treating this strategy as a template.

Chavismo was an ideological system built around a single charismatic figure. When Hugo Chávez died and Nicolás Maduro succeeded him, the movement lost its animating force. Lacking his predecessor's cult of personality and fearing treason by his own party members, Nicolás Maduro turned to a system of corruption to ensure the loyalty of his country's armed forces. Profits from narco-trafficking arrangements were distributed to military and government officials, providing short-term stability against domestic challenges, but it simultaneously hollowed out the democratic institutions that remained.²³ Years of sanctions further degraded the state's capacity to govern and generate revenue. The government was weak, and Maduro's legitimacy did not rest among the people but with the patronage system he built. He could not hold the regime together on his own.

The Trump administration exploited this weakness, and internal collaboration sealed the outcome. Delcy Rodríguez coordinated with U.S. officials in advance. She welcomed a Maduro removal, offered to serve in the transitional government, and expressed a commitment to working with U.S. oil companies. She was notably missing from the country when American special forces arrived.²⁴ The transition was smooth because it had been negotiated. Venezuela's intervention succeeded not because decapitation works, but because the target was a personalist, ideologically fragile government whose own

leadership had already defected.

Moreover, authoritarianism persists. There was little post-intervention planning, because the administration deemed the transfer of Venezuelan leadership to an American ally sufficient. The United States did not make accommodations for a post-Maduro democratic transition, advocate for free and fair elections, nor install the winner of the 2024 elections, whom they previously recognized.²⁵ Instead, the Trump administration is actively dictating Venezuelan policy; monthly budgets must be submitted to the United States, where Washington can either approve or reject Venezuelan proposals.²⁶ Oil and mining reforms have only resulted from direct pressure and threats of another invasion if the government fails to cooperate. Without any democratization efforts, Venezuela is transitioning into an economic liberalism model that guarantees the United States access to desired resources while maintaining an oppressive regime. For the Venezuelan people, this intervention is anything but a success.

Iran is the inverse of this case in every relevant dimension. It is institutionally deep, religiously grounded, and possesses a long institutional memory about what American regime management looks like and where it leads.

Translated to Iran

Institutional Depth and Leadership Vacuums

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been in power since 1979, surviving regional wars, leadership transitions, international sanctions, and repeated foreign attacks. Forty-seven years of institutional development means Iran far exceeds the theoretical threshold at which decapitation efforts rarely succeed. In those four decades, the Republic has not only amassed significant power but organized it across a layered institutional architecture where no single individual holds complete control. Despite the title of Supreme Leader, authority is mediated through multiple institutions: the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Guardian Council supervises elections and reviews and holds veto power over legislation passed by parliament. The Assembly of Experts is an 88-member elected body that appoints and oversees the Supreme

Leader's authority, an important body in the event of succession procedures. Security is divided between the conventional military (the Artesh), which controls territorial defense, and the IRGC, which is responsible for internal security. The IRGC not only functions as the dominant defense force but also holds vast political and economic power. Former IRGC commanders fill top government positions, and the organization effectively controls Iran's key economic sectors, including banking, construction, telecommunications, and petrochemical firms.²⁷ Quasi-state conglomerates (bonyads), banks, and enterprises account for over half of Iranian economic activity, ensuring no single entity absorbs the full weight of external financial pressure. These intricate webs of power demonstrate that regime survival is not predicated on the Supreme Leader. When interests diverge among clerical bodies, political institutions, and the security apparatus, he may serve as a final mediator.

But the Islamic Republic operates through a network of actors and organizations, each with varied responsibilities and veto powers to check legislative decisions.²⁸ This horizontal layering, expanded over the last forty years, makes it incredibly difficult to provoke instability, let alone regime failure, through the removal of Iranian leadership.

The possibility of a power vacuum did not destabilize Iran. Khamenei's age, paired with the growing threat environment, made the Republic acutely aware of the necessity of succession planning. Before his death, Khamenei approved a transition process, naming the immediate replacements for key military and political positions if those senior officials were killed. There was no chance for disorder. The IRGC assumed control swiftly, satisfying the three conditions necessary to fill a leadership vacuum. They were the best organized, best armed, and most willing actor to assume responsibility over the decision-making process. The various dissidents – the monarchists who advocate for the return of the Pahlavi dynasty, the exiled Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, or the democratic factions in the country – all lack the organizational integration and the domestic support that the IRGC has cultivated. Moreover, the IRGC has spent decades suppressing domestic dissent, surveilling public spaces, and imprisoning protestors, making it incredibly difficult for rivals to grow, let alone, contest the Revolutionary Guard's power. Dismantling the IRGC would be an even greater mistake. Removing the regime's coercive and financial core would

collapse the Iranian economy and produce a failed state, replicating the disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan. Leadership decapitation did not create a vacancy that threatened the regime's survival. It only confirmed what Iran's institutional architecture was designed to prevent.

Elite Response

External pressure is not a uniform force. It is dependent on a regime's institutional structure and the presence of pre-existing domestic instabilities. In recent years, large-scale protests and economic strain have plagued Iran. Due to tightened international sanctions, access to financial markets has become incredibly difficult, fueling high inflation rates, currency collapse, and declining purchasing power. The mismanagement of government funds, the repression of citizens, and the resulting spread of societal dissent generated low support for the Iranian regime prior to the war. Over time, differences in elite responses to these stressors could have created fractures at the highest level, driving internal change. But the United States and Israel foreclosed that possibility. A large-scale assault that targeted state leaders and killed Iranian children on its first day generated a unified response across the government and the public. Maximum external pressure applied against minor internal instabilities does not produce concessions. It gives the threatened regime a reason to consolidate. The Trump administration undermined its own leverage, compromising the chance of deepening a domestic crisis that was already developing.

Elite consolidation was further guaranteed by self-interest. Defection carries enormous political and material costs in Iran. The Islamic Republic controls the financial networks that allow elites to evade sanctions and sustain their wealth. Abandoning the regime means surrendering access to those resources, a risk few are willing to take under conditions of uncertainty and war.²⁹ Their survival is inextricably tied to the state.

The consequences of this consolidation are already visible. The Assembly of Experts elected Mojtaba Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader. Mojtaba has close ties to the IRGC, played a direct role in suppressing the Green Movement protests, fought to replace moderates with hardline loyalists, and opposes the reformist party that favors Western engagement.³⁰ The Islamic Republic's turn towards hardliners is a

sign of failure for the United States. His father was a willing negotiator, acting as an internal check on nuclear escalation. His removal has only empowered actors far less inclined to negotiate with Americans. Mojtaba and the new elite coalition likely see nuclear deterrence as Iran's only assurance against future attacks.³¹ The administration expected that aggression would force Iranian elites to concede, but the decision to start a war only opened the doors for consolidation, allowing the state to mend the domestic fractures that were beginning to form.

Nationalist Legitimacy

U.S. aggression not only unified the regime but also mobilized the public. The manner of Khamenei's death mattered. At his old age, with numerous health issues, the former Supreme Leader would likely have died of natural causes within a few years. Instead, a direct assassination transformed a dying, unpopular leader into a martyr. Within the days of the first strikes, mass mobilizations erupted across the region; protestors from Iraq, Kashmir, Pakistan, and Bahrain objected to U.S.-Israeli aggression against Iran.³² His death has been framed as a rallying call for an issue greater than him – unprovoked Western wars against the Muslim world. Rally 'round the flag' effects are occurring in real time. Inside Iran, hundreds of pro-regime demonstrations have filled the streets of Tehran. The political landscape is shifting. Groups that spent years fighting for government reforms and women's rights have lost their public space as regime supporters reclaim the streets. Calls for national unity have replaced calls for democracy. The Twelve-Day War produced a similar effect; CISSM analysis of public opinion surveys documented increases in public support of the Iranian government, military, and its nuclear and missile programs.³³ Similar attitudes are resurging, along with growing anti-American sentiments. As U.S.-manufactured weapons devastate civilian infrastructure and kill thousands of innocent Iranians, whatever initial hope existed has collapsed; few within the country still see the United States as a liberating force.

Domestic support has not simply grown organically. The theocratic nature of the Islamic Republic amplifies these effects, promoting national and religious identities as one. When faith is placed at the center of political life, attacks on the state become attacks on the religion itself. The regime has weaponized this fusion, framing external military aggression as an assault on

Islam. Religion can also serve as a boundary-making tool, dividing the in-groups from the out-groups. Citizens who express discontent with the regime can be painted as traitors aligned with the United States or Israel. War creates sides, transforming a politically complex issue into a binary choice of good versus evil. As regime loyalists fill the streets and those afraid of speaking out retreat to the shadows, the Islamic Republic continues to consolidate and grow in power. The decision to assassinate Iranian leaders mobilized support for the state, and the regime weaponized this approval to vilify dissenting voices. The United States handed the Islamic Republic an existential threat to fight against.

Broader Strategic Consequences

The war against Iran has produced ripple effects across the world. The United States is already facing the repercussions of its actions.

Since the beginning of the war, Iran has effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz to the United States and its allies. Approaching a three-month blockade, global oil inventories are declining at a record pace, and an economic crisis is on the horizon. Crude oil surpassed \$100 per barrel, driving gas prices upward and creating production shortages that are disrupting markets across Europe and Asia. The Strait is not only an oil chokepoint, but petrochemicals, fertilizers, and aluminum also travel through these waters, placing strain on agricultural and transportation supply chains.³⁴ Americans often use gasoline prices as a gauge of the country's economic wellbeing, and soaring expenses do not favor the Trump administration. With midterm elections approaching, the political costs of this war are compounding. A majority of Americans opposed the war from the outset, and that opposition is only growing. Most consequentially, the United States taught Iran a key strategic lesson: they have geographical dominance over the Strait of Hormuz, a tactic they had yet to militarily employ. The Trump administration failed to anticipate the leverage Iran would hold over the United States and the rest of the world.

The costs extend to America's allies. U.S. allies are a key constituency that support and maintain American primacy, because American military supremacy often benefits them. President Trump is creating fractures in this world order, and an unprovoked war of aggression against Iran only deepens the cracks in this weakening

trust. The administration has abandoned international institutions and refused to consult its European, Asian, and Gulf partners over its decision to attack, choosing to prioritize the interests of Israel instead. As a result, allies are choosing distance and redirection over support. Key defense partners, like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, have restricted themselves to defensive support, explicitly avoiding offensive operations and refusing to support escalation efforts, like blockades. Meanwhile, Gulf actors are diversifying their defense and economic partnerships, turning towards China and Russia as more stable and trustworthy partners.³⁵ Because of the war, the Gulf has suffered significant retaliatory damage to their aviation and energy sectors that U.S. weapons failed to prevent. The presence of American bases resulted in more harm than protection, and Iran's attacks may become a powerful motivator for the Gulf to reduce its defense agreements with the United States. At minimum, these states would not support future, periodic strikes on Iran, as the costs would be too severe. Because of an impulsive and self-serving war, U.S. allies are given further incentive to reduce their dependence on Washington for support. American primacy is weakening, and the Trump administration is only accelerating its decline.

This war has also exposed the material limits of the U.S. military. Patriot, THAAD, and Tomahawk systems, the key missile interceptors needed to deflect Iranian projectiles, were rapidly expended in the conflict's early weeks, faster than they could be replenished or transported.³⁶ Stockpile shortages do not only affect Gulf countries who are on the defense; U.S. adversaries also stand to benefit. American weapons have been redirected away from Taiwan and Ukraine, allowing China and Russia to capitalize off this distraction and intensify their own strategic positioning. The U.S. military is overstretched, and the administration must confront this reality.

The United States is losing its legitimacy both on the domestic front and on the world stage. Escalation and aggression are a failed political strategy, and the effects are clear: global isolation and a dying American world order. These setbacks indicate that a pivot is necessary.

Policy Recommendations

Regardless of when and how a permanent ceasefire arrives, the relationship between the United States

and Iran has undoubtedly worsened and the path back is not straightforward. The Trump administration's strategy of decapitation and regime management not only failed but strengthened the Islamic Republic, at least in the short-term. A different approach is needed. Strategic restraint that prioritizes de-escalation, targeted economic pressure, and a restructured alliance architecture offers a more effective framework for U.S. engagement abroad. The following three proposals work together toward that end.

Sanctions Relief

The United States has maintained sanctions against Iran since the Islamic Republic seized control over the state in 1979. Over four decades, these restrictions evolved from targeted asset freezes into a comprehensive trade embargo covering entire industries, including its energy and commercial bank sectors. Broad-sector sanctions tend to strengthen authoritarian regimes rather than weaken them. By restricting access to global financial markets, the United States has driven Iran's educated middle-class (i.e., academics, engineers, and scientists) out of the country. These are precisely the groups with the resources to dissent, protest, and push for internal reforms.³⁷ Democracy can only flourish from within, and sanctions undercut the domestic constituencies capable of producing it. As the middle-class emigrate, those who remain bear the financial burden of these comprehensive sanctions. After the rial collapsed and inflation soared, many Iranians lost their businesses and savings, no longer able to afford the bare necessities.³⁸ Widespread sanctions sever ordinary citizens from global trade, forcing them to flee or pushing them down the economic ladder. Meanwhile, the state not only escapes injury, but benefits at the expense of the public. Sanctions opened up greater black-market opportunities and increased the value of illicit oil trade, concentrating billions of dollars in annual revenue into elite hands while the legal Iranian economy is starved of benefits. The private sector increasingly depends on the IRGC out of necessity while state industries grow, allowing the regime to become self-sufficient.³⁹ Current sanctions fail to effectively target the Islamic Republic.

The United States should shift toward targeted sanctions designed to disrupt specific state revenue flows. Iran's drone production continues to function through front companies operating in the UAE and Turkey, sourcing dual-use technologies from

international markets. Strider has recently found several participating commercial businesses that the United States has not sanctioned.⁴⁰ Targeting primary drone manufacturers is not enough – supply chains are vast and each component must be thoroughly investigated. The massive maritime network of oil tankers that move sanctioned oil to willing buyers, known as the ‘shadow fleet,’ allow state actors to profit from oil smuggling. Sanctioning these petroleum industries while easing oil export restrictions would return revenue back into the hands of licit actors. A shift in tempo is necessary. Targeted sanctions are slow but specific, compounding on Iran’s domestic vulnerabilities. They would preserve economic channels that ordinary civilians depend upon, incrementally strip elites of their financial power, and create meaningful leverage for negotiations. While lifting broad-sector sanctions may appear to be a concession, they would prevent elite profiteering, restore space for legal economic activities, and generate long-term prospects for local democratic opposition to return. This would serve American interests far better than the current approach.

Nuclear Diplomacy

As negotiations resume, the Trump administration must choose its cards wisely. Iran averted strikes from two of the world’s most powerful actors while inflicting damage on neighboring states. They hold substantial leverage. If the United States makes excessive demands, they will not emerge from this conflict victorious. The Islamic Republic has never yielded to military pressure, but dialogue and diplomacy have a record of success. The key is to narrow the agenda.

The United States has historically pursued four objectives with Iran: preventing nuclear weapons acquisition, limiting ballistic missile capacity, severing ties with proxy groups, and facilitating political transformation. No administration has ever accomplished all four, and it would be impractical to pursue them simultaneously. More importantly, several of these goals reflect Israeli concerns more than American ones. Iran’s ballistic missiles cannot reach the United States, and American military bases have only been targeted in direct retaliation against American aggression. Israel, on the other hand, faces a greater threat due to their proximity to Tehran. Still, the country has never been under direct

fire outside of war. Similarly, militant groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, mainly attack in response to Israeli, not American, aggression. These organizations also operate from their own political and social contexts, and Tehran does not dictate their actions. Blocking access to Iranian financial networks will not resolve the social conditions that produced these groups.⁴¹ Likewise, a nuclear-armed Iran is often framed as Israel’s greatest threat. The United States is not threatened in the same capacity, so demanding complete nuclear dismantlement is unnecessary. The Trump administration should not be swayed by Israeli interests; a distinction must be made.

A framework that focuses exclusively on Iran’s nuclear program would address the only Iranian capability that could meaningfully threaten U.S. security. It should ask for a three-year pause on all uranium enrichment activities, a restoration of IAEA verification infrastructure, and a subsequent enrichment cap below 1.5% with no sunset clause. This would create an international verification mechanism to monitor suspicious sites and provide a guarantee of Iranian credibility that would prevent unnecessary Israeli escalation.⁴² Addressing the Iranian nuclear issue would resolve the security threat that both Israel and Iran pose to American interests in the region. The United States should give Iran a tangible return in the form of targeted sanctions relief. A durable nuclear agreement is achievable. The Trump administration must take the steps to ensure success at the negotiating table.

Offshore Balancing

A nuclear deal addresses the immediate crisis. Rebuilding the regional architecture and focusing on what U.S. defense partnerships should prioritize is the long-term task. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) paid the highest price of this war. Its members were not consulted before the strikes, suffered the greatest retaliatory damage, and have been sidelined from negotiations. Israel’s alliances with its Gulf neighbors have never been strong; this war has only harmed U.S. relationships with its Arab partners. To begin recovering this trust, Washington should support the development of a coordinated GCC security system, one that invests in improved aerial defense systems, shared funding pools for arms procurement, and co-production arrangements with American defense facilities. This reduces dependence on an overstretched U.S. supply chain, deepens intra-

Gulf integration, and ensures that regional actors have a reliable back-up when Washington is engaged elsewhere. The UAE's strength in military technology can complement Oman's role as diplomatic mediator between regional powers.⁴³ These are natural starting points. Every country, including the United States, will benefit from this arrangement.

More broadly, the United States must transition toward an offshore balancing strategy in the Middle East. The United States currently spends enormous sums financing the defense of its allies, allowing partners to prioritize their domestic needs while Washington absorbs its security responsibilities. This relationship has created an unsustainable debt, leading to shortages in American weapons and resources that cannot be easily resolved. This model encourages freeriding and repeatedly draws the United States into conflicts that its partners feel emboldened to start, knowing American support will follow. This can cease through the pursuit of a containment strategy. A stronger GCC coalition, built on shared resources, expertise, and mutual interest, could balance Iranian influence without requiring direct American intervention. By positioning the United States as the last point of contact rather than the first line of defense, the administration could preserve its core security commitments while disengaging from the cycle of preventive wars that has defined and damaged its legitimacy. There is no longer room for unilateral force. Strength through alliance-building must be the organizing principle going forward.

Conclusion

The assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei was, in tactical terms, a success. American and Israeli intelligence removed a leader who had governed for nearly four decades and dismantled the top echelon of the Iranian government in a single strike. However, the challenge was not assassinating leaders. It was shaping what came next. The Trump administration wagered that Iran's future leaders would read the strikes as evidence that resistance was futile and conceding to American demands was the only rational path forward. Instead, the Islamic Republic responded in the same manner that institutionally deep and religiously grounded regimes often do; elites unified and hardened, assuming control over the leadership vacuum and mobilizing supporters around a common enemy.

Mojtaba Khamenei does not govern from a position of weakness. If the regime continues to consolidate and martyrdom continues to mobilize the Iranian people, then the United States will soon realize the long-term effects of its reckless decision. The historical record, across Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and Venezuela is consistent and reiterates similar lessons that the United States must learn from. The Trump administration cannot shape the political choices Iranian leaders make through force and aggression. It requires a patient, targeted, and strategically disciplined approach. The decision to assassinate Iranian officials was a fatal mistake. Now, the United States must reassess.

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