



Hedging for War: How Washington's Foreign Policy Experts Blame Trump for a War with Iran They Helped Legitimate

March 21, 2026

Negar Razavi

TAGS:

Foreign Policy, Iran, War

CITATION:

Razavi, Negar, 2026. "Hedging for War: How Washington's Foreign Policy Experts Blame Trump for a War with Iran They Helped Legitimate," Security in Context Policy Brief 26-01. March 2026, Security in Context.

1 Title of Policy Brief Goes in this Header

With each passing day, the US-Israeli war on Iran looks increasingly like a moral and security quagmire-in-the-making. The US and Israel continue to [kill and maim civilians across Iran and Lebanon](#), internally displace millions more, and destroy civilian infrastructure across both countries. Nearly three weeks into this war, contrary to what many in DC and Tel Aviv expected, Iran is still striking Israel along with other targets across the Middle East, all while the actual price tag of the conflict increases along with global energy prices. And despite several high-profile assassinations, including of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iran's security apparatus appears far from collapsing, according to US [intelligence](#) reports, while human rights groups report that the government's [repression at home](#) has increased.

Who could have predicted this latest foreign policy disaster?

The truth is many US foreign policy experts in Washington have. [Since 2002](#), the US military, along with a number of think tanks and their experts have run [repeated war-games](#) and other [simulations](#) that showed exactly how this war would play out. Nearly [all of them](#) predicted that it would end badly for the US and Israel.

Was this war then simply the hubris of Trump not heeding the warnings of the "experts"?

Not quite.

In reality, the problem of expertise is far more complicated when it comes to Iran, as many of these same foreign policy experts – including those who specialize on Iran – helped lay the ideological groundwork for this war by continually challenging the viability of diplomatic solutions with Iran.

As a political anthropologist, I have been studying the role of think tank experts in shaping Washington's Iran debate for the past fifteen years. While these experts are far from a political monolith, most fall within a limited spectrum of views when it comes to US policy toward Iran.

On one end of that spectrum are the "Iran war hawk" experts, who have been openly calling for US military strikes (and/or support for Israeli strikes) for decades. [John Bolton](#), an expert at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Trump's former National Security Adviser, is perhaps the best-known example in this camp, but he is far from the only [one](#).

2 Title of Policy Brief Goes in this Header

Other DC experts have increasingly spoken in favor of “limited military strikes” against Iran alongside other coercive tools, namely economic warfare in the form of sanctions and psychological warfare in support of “information” campaigns targeting people living inside Iran. This view is best exemplified by the June 2025 [Foreign Affairs](#) piece, “The Right Path to Regime Change in Iran,” in which Ray Takeyh, Eric Edelman, and Marc Gerecht Reuel take the position that a combination of sustained Israeli strikes, online anti-government campaigns targeting the Iranian people, and on-the-ground intelligence work by Mossad agents could help the Iranian people successfully topple their government.

While the vast majority of foreign policy experts in DC have been fallen short of calling for war with Iran, they collectively undermined the moral and strategic value of pursuing diplomacy with Iran. As one of my interlocutors explained: “These guys don’t come out and say they want war with Iran, but when you close every possible door to negotiation, then that is what you are left with.”

In a way, this form of “expert hedging” on war with Iran has resulted in a series of contradictory ideas about Iran and its leaders that paved the way for precisely this kind of reckless confrontation.

The first of these contradictions treats the Islamic Republic as an all-powerful security apparatus that poses an existential threat to its people and regional enemies (i.e. Israel) but also considers it so weak that it can be toppled by its own unarmed citizens through mass street mobilizations. This contradiction reproduces the nearly annual prediction about the imminent collapse of the Islamic Republic.

The second is that all the power in the Islamic Republic is [consolidated in the hands](#) of the Supreme Leader and top leaders of the IRGC. However, when the US military kills these figures – beginning with Qassem Soleimani in 2020 and eventually Ali Khamenei at the start of this war – the narrative in DC then shifts to focus on another set of leaders, failing to recognize that Iran’s government is a complex security apparatus rather than a cult of personality alone.

Another popular contradiction in DC’s thinking about Iran is that the Islamic Republic cannot abide by [diplomatic negotiations](#) or deals because of its leaders’ inherent [irrationality](#), fanaticism, and/or [deception](#). Therefore, the US must [unilaterally withdraw](#) from all negotiations with Iran or deceive the Iranian government by using negotiations as a strategic cover to exert military force in order to get even more concessions from the Iranian government.

A fourth idea that dominates DC circles is that the US must [continue to expand](#) its weapons sales, military aid, and bases to contain Iran’s regional threat in the Middle

3 Title of Policy Brief Goes in this Header

East. However, Iran's government should not respond to the threat posed by the growing militarization of its regional adversaries by supporting those groups and governments that align with their geostrategic interests. If anything, Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Palestine – through a strategy Iran's leaders call "Forward Defense" – only proves the circular logics among Washington's experts that Iran's ["true" intentions](#) are to dangerously expand their power through "proxies" across the region.

The fifth contradiction is one I heard often in DC's security and intelligence circles: that a lack of US diplomatic presence inside Iran puts the US at a strategic disadvantage (i.e. no eyes and ears on the ground). However, the only way to deal with Iran moving forward is to continue to diplomatically isolate Iran.

A sixth contradiction is that [sanctions are a successful tool in pressuring](#) the Iranian security apparatus to alter its domestic and geopolitical behavior, even as such sanctions have [further consolidated economic, political, and geopolitical power](#) in the hands of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

A final contradictory idea is that the Iranian government is an exceptionally repressive, cruel government that hurts its own people. However, the US will implement policies such as widespread economic sanctions, falsely claim it will [defend](#) protestors, and end [legal immigration](#) for ordinary Iranians, which hurt the very same people and leave them far more vulnerable to their repressive government.

Ultimately, I would assert that through these and other contradictions, the experts in Washington have maintained a status quo of simmering conflict with Iran that under the right (or in this case, wrong) political and geopolitical conditions made war the most likely outcome. The idea that U.S. policymakers will now turn to this same community of experts to offer a pathway out of this war is just as irresponsible.

Join the discussion and learn more at securityincontext.org

Security in Context is a networked initiative that promotes critical research and policy analysis on peace and conflict. Despite decades of prioritizing security, our planet has become increasingly insecure. We examine why, and show how rethinking military and security policy can reveal more equitable and sustainable solutions to the world's most pressing problems.

Security in Context was formally launched in October 2020 with generous support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

