

Iran Teeters on Regime Change

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I. Executive Summary

Tensions between Iran and the United States erupted at the end of February 2026 with a sudden military escalation in the Iranian region. With war declared, missiles launched, and military leaders killed, the path to peace grows increasingly complicated.

II. Overview

A. Context

On February 28, 2026, Iran was attacked from a coordinated Joint missile attack from the U.S. and Israel, resulting in the death of Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran. Prior to this eventful circumstance, tensions have been noted from aggressive statements delivered by President Trump regarding Iran's nuclear capabilities. The reasons for this campaign, explained by Trump, is to "eliminate imminent threats from the Iranian regime" by aiming to destroy Iran's missile capabilities, preventing nuclear development, and halting the Iranian navy. In response to the fatal strikes, Iran struck back at the partnered countries, targeting American facilities in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and other countries. Tel Aviv and Jerusalem were also targeted. As of recently, attacks continue toward Iran from Israel. Trump demands an "unconditioned surrender" to ultimately stop the strikes.

B. Historical Tensions

The U.S. and Iran have long maintained a testy relationship; the current conflict manifests as one of many clashes. Dating from the mid-20th century, the U.S. has demonstrated considerable engagement in Iranian political affairs such as its funding of coup d'etats. Following the 9/11 attacks of 2001, U.S. involvement in the Middle East was newly justified as anti-terrorism efforts to eliminate weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). A prime example is the 2003

invasion of Iraq, where statements of Iran's WMDs and connections to Al-Qaeda led to the disestablishment of Saddam Hussein's regime and a search for evidence of nuclear development. Despite no conclusive evidence of WMDs in Iran, the U.S. actively aims to neutralize nuclear development in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries. In 2015, the Obama administration negotiated and implemented the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia, and Germany. Iran was to agree to limit its nuclear capabilities, ranging from reducing uranium stockpile by 98% and enrichment to 3.67% overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in exchange for sanctions relief. The JCPOA sought to prevent a revival of Iran's nuclear weapon system and reduce potential conflict with its regional rivals. Although President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 allowed Iran to resume its nuclear developments temporarily, Trump's administration in 2025 again ordered a crackdown on Iranian nuclear sites and the conjoined assault of February 28, aiming to eliminate the facilities.

III. Policy Problem

A. Current Stances

Following the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the escalation of trilateral tensions, policymakers and analysts have begun debating the future of Iran's political system. The "war hawks" argue that the current instability presents an opportunity to dismantle the Islamic Republic and pursue regime change. These voices support a more aggressive strategy that would weaken Iran's military infrastructure and prevent the country from rebuilding its nuclear capabilities. In contrast, more cautious voices advocate for diplomatic restraint. This "pacifist" stance warns that forcing regime change from the outside could create significant regional instability, potentially leading to prolonged conflict similar to those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Several proposals have emerged regarding the future of the Iranian government upon its possible collapse. One prominent figure discussed in these conversations is Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of Iran's former monarch who advocates for a transition toward a secular democratic government in Iran through constitutionalism and free elections. Other proposals include the formation of a democratic republic led by opposition groups or a transitional coalition government that could guide the country toward political reform. At the same time, some believe a modified version of Iran's current theocratic system could emerge if religious leadership retains significant influence. These competing proposals highlight the uncertainty surrounding Iran's political future and the broader debate over how the international community should respond to potential regime change.

B. Policy Impact

The War Powers Resolution is a federal law passed in 1973 reaffirming Congress's authority over declaring war with another nation. Under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution,¹ only Congress has the power to declare war; the President must notify Congress within 48 hours of deploying US troops into hostilities. Any unauthorized hostility is limited to 60 days. While Congress attempted to invoke the War Powers Act in response to President Trump's military activity against Iran, the proposal failed to pass both chambers.²