

# The United States Cannot ‘Win’ a War on Iran

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Iran certainly cannot win a war in the face of the massive U.S. and Israeli onslaught. As recent weeks have shown, however, it can still prevent the United States from winning.

In a new form of asymmetrical warfare, Iran has proven itself capable of wreaking havoc on the global economy to punish the United States and Israel for its aggression.

President Donald Trump is a bully. Whether with women or with nations, he is willing to cross any moral or legal boundaries in order to dominate and control. He thinks he has the right to impose his will, whatever the consequences and however unpopular it may be with the international community and the American public. His insistence he should [have had a say](#) in picking Iran’s leadership underscores this war is ultimately about control.

This is not something the Iranian regime will accept, however much destruction will be rained down upon the country. The Tehran regime [appears](#) uninterested in a ceasefire. [According to](#) Trita Parsi of the [Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft](#), there is a sense that the decision to accept a ceasefire in the twelve-day war last June “only enabled the United States and Israel to restock and remobilize to launch war again. If they agree to a ceasefire now, they will only be attacked again in a few months.”

There [appears to have been](#) a mistaken belief in Washington, D.C., that the regime would implode upon the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other leaders, failing to recognize that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a complex network of overlapping interests with a stake in the status quo, not a regime that can be toppled by killing a few leaders. That failure has resulted in increasingly heavy bombardment of an ever-widening range of targets, along with the possibility of [arming](#) Kurdish rebels and other restive minorities and introducing U.S. ground troops.

The Trump Administration has been unwilling to recognize that the Iranian regime could endure a long, incredibly one-sided, and utterly devastating war in the face of massive casualties. However, with Trump [calling for](#) Iran’s “unconditional surrender,” it has become an existential war for the Iranian regime. Given how the Islamic Republic was willing to [slaughter](#) thousands of Iranians during the pro-democracy protests before the war, it is not likely to have much compunction about many thousands more being killed at the hands of foreign powers, particularly since many in leadership see their mandate as coming from God.

Few authoritarian regimes in the post-World War II era have been toppled through foreign military intervention, and none through bombing alone. Hardly any have turned into stable democracies as a result. Indeed, Trump [has said](#) he does not care if Iran does not become a democracy as long as it is compliant with American interests.

In the face of the horrific massacres of demonstrators earlier this year, there was some hope that the regular [Iranian army](#) might move in to depose the clerics and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the two [foundations](#) of the regime’s power. While less politically and economically influential than the IRGC, the regular army is much larger and is composed largely of conscripts not necessarily allied with the regime. With them now under constant barrage and fighting to defend themselves from foreign attackers, however, this scenario seems far less likely.

The most common and successful method of toppling autocrats has been through [unarmed civil resistance](#), of which Iran has [a rich history](#). Despite Trump’s [call](#) on the Iranian people to rise up, most Iranians at this point are just desperately trying to survive. It was not surprising, then, the [initial celebrations](#) over the killing of the hated “Supreme Leader,” and others in his circle, failed to turn into a movement. And no popular struggle is helped by vocal support from a nation’s sworn enemies, particularly if they are [currently killing](#) thousands of your people.

People tend to rally around the flag if their country is being bombed, particularly as civilian casualties grow. During [my time in](#) Iran in 2019, while the popular anger and frustration at the regime was palpable, and there was a clear desire to bring it down, I found no one advocating for war.

Comments by Secretary of Defense [Pete Hegseth](#) and White House Deputy Chief of Staff [Stephen Miller](#) that the United States is no longer bound by international humanitarian law and other rules of engagement have already led U.S. and Israeli forces to target schools, hospitals, city parks, and cultural sites along with military and governmental facilities. This will likely lead to only greater resistance.

The big mistake the United States made in Vietnam was seeing the struggle as one of fighting communism which, as an expansionist totalitarian ideology, it felt, had to be confronted with massive military force as was done against the fascists in Germany, Italy, and Japan during World War II. It failed to recognize that the National Liberation Front (the NLF or “Viet Cong”), while communist-led, [was first and foremost](#) a nationalist movement. So policymakers didn’t understand why the more troops they sent and the more they bombed, the stronger the resistance became.

Similarly, in Iran, the regime is seen in Washington, D.C., through its Islamist identity and its efforts to spread a reactionary version of Shia Islam in the region. What the U.S. government fails to understand is that the regime’s hold on power comes in large part from taking advantage of its people’s strong embrace of nationalism and anti-imperialism. (During my time in Iran, I noticed nationalist symbols were far more common in government propaganda than Islamist ones.) As a result, the terror bombing and calls to surrender to U.S. and Israeli demands is breeding its own resistance.

Iran is an industrialized nation of more than ninety million people that has been a major regional power [for much of the past](#) 2,500 years and will not easily yield to foreign aggression.

So, if the regime cannot be replaced, the ultimate goal may become to subject the country to such massive destruction it can no longer [serve as a deterrent](#) to U.S. hegemony in this major oil-rich region, and send a message to any governments that dare to defy U.S. objectives they either do what the U.S. President says or suffer utterly devastating consequences.

Even some of the current Iranian government’s harshest opponents fear “regime collapse.” They have seen the aftermath of foreign intervention in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan. Despite promises of freedom, each of these countries descended into chaos and civil war and/or were forced to endure a foreign occupation. As British Pakistani journalist Saima Mohsin [noted](#), “We know how imperial powers treat ‘liberated’ nations in the Middle East.”

With the unlikelihood of an effective Iranian surrender, the only realistic way to end the carnage is to get the United States to end the war.

The war is already unpopular with the American public. Even controversial wars like the invasion of Iraq had majority popular support once they were underway due to initial successes and a perceived obligation to back the government in wartime and to “support our troops” who were in harm’s way. Though [initial support](#) for the war with Iran nearly doubled from [pre-war polls](#), this is still the first American war to have [only minority support](#) at its outset.

There are [growing concerns](#) among American military and intelligence officials that they will not be able to bring down the regime through air power alone. There are also limits to U.S. weapons stockpiles, [raising questions](#) as to how long the war can be sustained. The best hope in ending the carnage may be some kind of hurting stalemate resulting in a ceasefire where both sides could claim victory—the U.S. government claiming it has sufficiently damaged Iran’s military capabilities and the Iranian government noting that it survived.

This is not likely to happen, however, until the physical destruction in Iran and, to a much lesser but not insignificant extent, other countries mounts. And, as evidenced by the current so-called ceasefire in Gaza, a humanitarian crisis and intermittent bombing will likely continue amid the rubble and the conflict will remain unresolved.

**Editor’s note:** *This article was written for the magazine on the eighth day of an ongoing war on the nation of Iran. It has been updated slightly to reflect events as they continue to unfold. At least fourteen countries have so far been drawn into the conflict, and in early March, the estimated cost to the U.S. taxpayer was estimated to be about \$1 billion per day. Since its founding in 1909, The Progressive has [always opposed](#) the use of military force to resolve conflicts.*