

[What Are the Trump Administration's True Objectives in Iran?](#)

Many of President Trump's stated justifications for the US and Israeli war on Iran are demonstrably false.

By [Stephen Zunes](#) , [Truthout](#) March 4, 2025

The ramifications of the escalating U.S.-Israeli war on Iran remain to be seen, but they will not be good. Indeed, as with the U.S.-led war on Iraq, the war on Iran could prove disastrous. It is important to understand, therefore, what would motivate the United States to launch such a reckless, illegal, and destructive action.

Not surprisingly, most of President Donald Trump's justifications for the war are demonstrably false:

First of all, there is [no evidence](#) that Iran was planning a pre-emptive attack or constituted an imminent threat, as [Secretary of State Marco Rubio](#) and others have claimed. Secondly, given that Iran's missiles have a maximum range of 1800 miles, and that Iran is estimated to be a decade away from developing intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching North America, [Trump's claim](#) that Iran was on the verge of being able to attack the United States is absurd.

Trump also repeated the [long-debunked claim](#) that thousands of Americans and millions of others were killed and wounded by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) made by Iran. Not only are these numbers gross exaggerations, but the vast majority of IEDs targeting U.S. forces were manufactured by Iraqi guerrillas (most of whom were anti-Iranian Salafists, Baathists, and others), not by Iran. And the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen's Aden Harbor, which Trump has also mentioned, was done by Al-Qaeda, a bitter rival of Iran, not by anyone from Iran.

Iran's brutal repression of its own people is [well-documented](#), but U.S. support for regimes that have engaged in either severe repression against pro-democracy protesters or mass killings of civilians — including Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Turkey, Egypt, and others — belies any genuine concern about promoting human rights and democracy.

In this moment, Trump has made calls for the Iranian people to again rise up, but that cannot realistically take place while the country is being bombed. Indeed, being attacked by a foreign power generally leads people to rally around the flag. For example, while eventually successful, the Serbian democratic movement against the Milosevic regime [was set back](#) by the 1999 NATO bombing of their country.

Indeed, a truly democratic Iran would likely reflect the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist sentiments of the majority of Iranians and have more credibility than the corrupt, reactionary government currently in power, something the United States would presumably want to avoid.

[Trump falsely stated](#) that Iran had never pledged not to build a nuclear weapon, when its leaders [have in fact pledged not to](#) repeatedly. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has also tried to push the contradictory claim that the United States ["obliterated"](#) Iran's nuclear program during its strikes last June, while simultaneously [insisting](#) Iran is "probably a week away from having industrial grade bomb making material." Neither is true.

Meanwhile, there is no credible means by which the Trump administration can use Iran's nuclear program to justify the war. The talks to revive the nuclear agreement were ongoing. On February 27, the Omani mediator said there had been significant progress in U.S.-Iranian talks and a deal was ["within reach."](#) Furthermore, Iran's nuclear program would not have even been an issue had Trump not [unilaterally pulled out](#) of the 2015 nuclear deal, which would have put very strict limits on Iran's nuclear capabilities which, combined with its rigorous enforcement mechanisms, would have made it [physically impossible](#) for Iran to build a bomb.

It was doubtful that Trump even wanted a nuclear agreement, however. Given the scale of the ongoing military operations, it's clear that these attacks had been planned for some time. Indeed, Trump's insistence that he would not lift sanctions even if Iran gave into his demands provided Iranian negotiators little incentive to compromise. Furthermore, the Trump administration's insistence that any deal with Iran also include agreements on other issues — such as eliminating Iran's missile program, its support for regional allies, and internal repression — likely would have doomed the negotiations to failure. Even Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, despite their extreme anti-Soviet views, recognized that their nuclear agreements with Moscow would not have been possible if they insisted on including other contentious issues between the two countries in those deals.

It is striking, though — in contrast to every other modern president who has taken the United States to war — how little effort Trump put into convincing Congress or the U.S. public that it was necessary. In 2003, George W. Bush devoted much of his State of the Union address just prior to the invasion of Iraq to making his case — albeit [inaccurate and misleading](#) — for why the U.S. should go to war. By contrast, Trump spoke about Iran for less than three minutes of his one hour-48-minute State of the Union address, underscoring how he really didn't care that much about convincing Congress or the U.S. public of the necessity to launch a major war in the Middle East.

So, why has the United States gone to war against Iran?

Much of it has to do with what was perceived as an opportunity. The Iranian regime has never been more isolated, both internationally and domestically. Its violent repression of pro-democracy protesters in January and its status as a pariah state has resulted in a somewhat muted response in the international community to the U.S.-Israeli attacks, despite their clear illegality. Meanwhile, Syria's Assad regime, the only state in region that the Iranian government considered an ally, was toppled in late 2024 in a popular uprising, and its Houthi and Hezbollah allies have been dramatically weakened by devastating air strikes in recent years. Domestically, the anger at the regime has never been higher, particularly after its recent massacre of thousands of anti-government demonstrators.

However, such setbacks do not mean the regime is on the verge of collapse, even with the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei. Iran's supreme leader was 86 years old and in declining health. His death will not likely change much except that this widely reviled cleric has now been made a martyr. More salient is the fact that Iran was already as much a militarized authoritarian state as a theocracy, with the Revolutionary Guard exerting at least as much power as the clergy. Even killing a few of their commanders as well will not weaken their control over the country. The authoritarian regime in Iran is not a typical one-man dictatorship in which the government can be toppled by a single leader's elimination. Rather, the Iranian regime comprises a complex system of powerful overlapping institutions that have a stake in maintaining the system. As a result, the killing of leaders, while a serious setback in some cases, will not likely constitute a fatal blow.

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Among those wishing to take advantage of Iran's weakened state has been Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been pushing for a major war against Iran for decades. However, while Israel has joined the United States in its war on Iran in pursuit of their common objectives, there is little indication that the Trump administration is doing this to protect Israel. Israel has more than adequate defenses from any possible Iranian aggression, including a nuclear deterrent.

U.S. hostility toward an independent-minded Iran has been a major component of U.S. foreign policy for decades, regardless of Israel. The United States overthrew its democratically elected prime minister in 1953. The United States repeatedly attacked Iran's navy, coastal installations, and even a civilian airliner in the so-called 1987-88 "tanker war" toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War. The United States armed Kurdish and Baluchi separatists in the 2000s. Over the decades, the United States has supported the Gulf Arab monarchies, Israel, and even Saddam's Iraq in targeting Iran.

I've never seen any evidence that Israel was behind any of those policies and, despite Netanyahu's encouragement, there is little evidence that he or the pro-Israel lobby were a decisive factor in Trump's decision to go to war. Trump is nobody's puppet. Failing any direct evidence that this war would not have taken place were it not for the Israeli government and its backers, there should be caution about claiming that it was — both for the sake of accuracy as well as the importance of not reinforcing old antisemitic canards about Jews manipulating non-Jewish political leaders into pursuing destructive policies they would not have otherwise taken.

Ultimately what this war is about is going after the one major power left in the region that has dared to challenge U.S. hegemony. It's about the "full spectrum dominance" originally articulated in the [2002 National Security Strategy](#) during the Bush administration. Since even weeks of heavy bombing are not likely to bring down the Iranian government, the goal may be to inflict as much damage as possible, making Iran an example to any other country that dares defy the United States.

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What the United States and Israel want, therefore, is a weakened Iran, one with a severely damaged infrastructure that is incapable of meeting the needs of its own people, much less serving as a counterweight to U.S. hegemony. The U.S. and Israel appear to be angling to create a situation where ethnic minorities (which constitute close to half the nation's population), leftists, monarchists, religious factions, and others will struggle against each other amid the ruins, leaving the nation weak and divided. In effect, if the United States cannot impose a government of its choosing, it is seeking to turn Iran into a failed state.

Indeed, it appears the United States and Israel are targeting not just regime leaders, but also dissident nationalists and moderate Islamists. Former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, the central figure in the [2009 Green Movement](#) against the regime, [narrowly escaped assassination](#) by an airstrike targeting his residential building, where he has been under house arrest. There have been a number of [reports](#) of prominent [Iranian leftists](#) being targeted as well. Perhaps the United States believes that, in targeting all of these different groups, it will make it easier, in the event of a regime collapse, to reinstate the monarchy as the United States did back in 1953.

It is very unlikely, however, that this effort will succeed. From the outset, Trump has treated Iran as if it were one of the Central American governments that the U.S. treated like vassal states in the early to mid-twentieth century, essentially dictating policies under threat of overthrowing the government. But Iran, by contrast, is an industrialized nation of over 90 million people that has been a major regional power for much of the past 2,500 years.

Washington's big mistake in Vietnam was seeing the conflict as part of an advancing global totalitarian threat that needed to be met by massive military support. In reality, the National Liberation Front (a.k.a. the "Viet Cong"), while communist-led, was first and foremost a nationalist movement, which was why the more the U.S. bombed and the more combat troops were sent, the greater the resistance. Similarly, the United States, by focusing on the religious orientation of the Iranian regime, is grossly underestimating its staying power as a nationalist government.

As a result, this overtly imperialist effort, like most attempts of hegemonic overreach by Western powers, is almost certain to yield unexpected and devastating consequences.