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The Iran Imperative

—
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In early 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran was riding high. It was the dominant external actor in four Middle Eastern states: Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Its missiles and armed proxies menaced and coerced Arab countries. Israel, Tehran's main enemy, had been damaged by Hamas's October 2023 attack and was fighting a seven-front war against Iranian proxies. The Islamic Republic's nuclear program was moving steadily closer to producing a weapon as Iranian officials enriched uranium to 60 percent and expanded their ballistic missile manufacturing. Suddenly, the regime's long-standing calls for "death to Israel" and "death to America" seemed to have much more meaning. Iran appeared close to fulfilling its five-decade quest to become the most powerful country in the Muslim world.

Then, in April 2024, Israel struck a Quds Force meeting building situated adjacent to the Iranian embassy complex. The facility served as the operational headquarters for Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' operations in Syria and Lebanon, who was responsible for coordinating Iranian-led terror activities against Israel. Iran, in turn, directly attacked Israel. And in the months that followed, it quickly became clear that Tehran's prior confidence was misplaced: the regime

was much more vulnerable than it seemed. Israel, alongside France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, intercepted almost all of Iran's drones and missiles. Israel then destroyed Iran's air defense systems. Israeli forces dealt a severe blow to Hezbollah—Iran's most vaunted proxy—by killing its longtime leader and destroying many of its weapons. In June 2025, Israel launched a military strike against Iran's nuclear sites and ballistic missile facilities. Working with Washington, it bombed and buried much of Iran's enriched uranium. And in February this year, the United States and Israel again went to war with Iran, severely damaging more of its military and security infrastructure, striking the regime's defense production industries, and eliminating senior figures at the highest levels, including former Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his top deputy, Ali Larijani.

But despite these successes, not everyone in the United States is pleased. In fact, many American analysts believe the conflict has squandered U.S. resources in what is almost certain to be an unsuccessful attempt to change Iran's regime. Some also think the war has happened at the behest of the Israelis, and that the conflict has undermined the United States' reputation and churned through its munitions in order to weaken a country that is mainly a threat to Haifa, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv.

But these objections are wrong. This was never a conflict of choice. Iran declared war on the United States (which it calls the "Great Satan") as soon as the Islamic Republic came into being, when regime affiliates stormed the U.S. embassy and held 66 diplomats hostage for over a year. Tehran has since killed, directly or indirectly, thousands of American troops. Even in its weakened state, the regime still menaced Washington's interests. Critics of this recent war also overlook its success. By greatly weakening Iran's radical regime, the conflict has given more pragmatic officials an opportunity to seize control while increasing the confidence and relevance of domestic opposition forces. It has accelerated the creation of a broad anti-Iran alignment that

includes Israel, the United States, key Arab states—including Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—and some European countries. It has, in other words, laid the groundwork for a better Middle East.

That does not mean a positive future is guaranteed. In Tehran, hardliners are fighting to remain ascendant. Israel's regional status needs rehabilitation after the war with Gaza, which eroded trust between Israel and Arab countries. That is why it must deepen its cooperation with the United States. The two countries need to enmesh their defense bases and use their combined might to attack Iran until it can no longer meaningfully threaten its neighbors. They should jointly offer assistance and protection to Arab states that are struggling not just with Tehran but also with a host of environmental and economic challenges. By doing so, they can prove to the Arab countries that the safest bet is to partner with Israel and the United States rather than cozy up to Iran, China, or Russia. They can thus pave the way for Arab-Israeli normalization—and make sure Washington remains central to the region.

FINISH THE JOB

For years, the United States' approach toward Iran revolved around sanctions and diplomacy that had little impact. But when U.S. President Donald Trump returned to office in January 2025, he decided to be courageous and attack the regime. His administration's goals are to destroy Iran's ballistic missile capabilities and industrial base, prevent it from threatening regional waterways and energy infrastructure, avert any future nuclear breakout, and sharply reduce Tehran's capacity to fund, arm, and direct proxy forces across the region. These aims reflect long-standing American priorities: stabilizing the Middle East, avoiding proliferation, and maintaining freedom of navigation.

Israel, of course, shares this agenda. But it has reinforced, rather than displaced, the United States' role. Israeli forces have helped protect the United States and regional partners through intelligence sharing and strikes on Iran's missile program. In doing so, they have fought shoulder to shoulder with American troops as no state has since World War II—despite not being a formal treaty ally. The campaign has thus underscored that Israel is not merely a U.S. security consumer. Under certain conditions, it can function as a close and capable partner.

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American and Israeli strikes have eroded much of Iran's capacity for destruction and coercion. But they need to make sure Iran cannot rebuild its capabilities. To do so, Washington will need to set up a verification and enforcement regime that

can prevent Iran from constructing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and rebuilding its missile and drone capabilities. It can accomplish this by working with its regional partners, which all cooperate under U.S. Central Command, along with other states that have interests in the Middle East. Washington must also sustain maximum economic pressure on the current Iranian regime. It should maintain blockades and no-fly zones that ensure Iran does not again become a regional threat. Finally, it must condition an end to these restrictions on Tehran dismantling its nuclear program, fully disbanding its proxy networks, ceasing its support for terrorist organizations, generally abandoning its efforts to export its revolutionary Islamist ideology, and explicitly recognizing Israel's existence and the sovereignty of the many Arab states it has attacked.

Neutralizing Iran's proxies is particularly essential. For decades, Iran has been able to wreak havoc on the Middle East by arming, funding, and coordinating nonstate partners—mostly through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These actors then carry out attacks of all

kinds at the behest of Tehran, allowing the Islamic Republic to cause massive chaos while maintaining plausible deniability.

To shatter Iran's network, Israel and Washington must establish a regional effort supported by the countries Iran has attacked during the war. The point of such a campaign would not be to eliminate Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, or militias in Iraq. It is to leave them so fragmented and constrained that they struggle to function, particularly beyond their own countries. An intense U.S.-Israeli campaign could also drive a wedge between these groups and Tehran by making it clear that, when push comes to shove, the Iranians cannot save them. That, in turn, would neutralize their potential threat to the region.

Weakening the Islamic Republic also requires supporting Iranian opposition figures who seek regime change. American and Israeli leaders have both said they want to see new leaders in Tehran. But neither has, at the time of this writing, made regime change a formal objective. They should in the postwar campaign. And they should then use covert operations, economic pressure, and political and information warfare to further intensify pressure on Iran as a means of deepening internal regime divisions and undermining its ability to protect security personnel, their families, and the Iranian economic elite. Ultimately, regime change is the task of the Iranian people, but Israel and Washington can help create the conditions the country's citizens need.

SPARRING PARTNERS

If the Islamic Republic is weakened, Israel and Washington will have opened the way for building a new Middle East. In recent years, many of Washington's partners in the region felt compelled to establish diplomatic ties with Tehran in order to stop periodic attacks from Iranian forces and proxies. But if Arab states no longer fear such violence, they will not need to kowtow to the regime. The war has

already made it clear that trying to play nice with Tehran won't save these states from experiencing its fury. Gulf Arab governments set up all kinds of diplomatic and economic linkages with Iran in the 2020s, but none of them stopped Tehran from bombarding their countries. The Gulf's efforts to be friendly with China and Russia—Iran's two main patrons—have also failed to provide protection. The war has thus made it clear that the United States is still the only credible external security provider in the Middle East.

In fact, the joint U.S.-Israeli campaigns against Iran in 2025 and 2026 already mark an inflection point in the long effort to undermine Tehran's regional position. The 2026 campaign, known in Israel as Roaring Lion and in the United States as Epic Fury, has helped restore American military prestige after years in which the Islamic Republic and its proxies concluded that Washington and its regional allies were unwilling to bear the costs of sustained confrontation. Israel and the United States, in other words, don't need more proof that their efforts are working.

The success of these attacks also suggests that it is time for Washington to stop basing its relationship with Israel mostly on providing military aid. Instead, the two sides should focus just as much on operational integration and industrial collaboration. To do so, the United States wouldn't need to increase security assistance. It would just have to gradually shift the emphasis of its aid away from funding for the purchase of American weapons and toward their joint development. It should also upgrade Israel's position within the American industrial base by reducing political and procedural barriers and turning the Israeli industrial base into a sandbox for U.S. defense innovations. Doing so would allow Israel to better protect American interests in the Middle East and test emerging American military technologies, giving Washington better insight into how well its systems perform against their joint rivals.

Israel and the United States should even broaden their cooperation to include cutting-edge technologies. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, rare-earth elements, and advanced energy are all central to geopolitical competition, and the United States needs help to either gain or hold a lead in each. Israel can provide such aid. Its highly educated population and sophisticated tech companies, for instance, can work with American companies on breakthroughs in AI security, advanced semiconductor packaging, critical materials processing, testing advanced forms of energy, and quantum-enabled technologies.

MENDING FENCES

Although military success against Iran can, on its own, open the door to a better and more stable Middle East, it will not by itself create this new regional order. To do that, Israel and the United States will have to translate their tactical and operational gains into a new political architecture that includes the region's other pivotal states: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and perhaps even Cyprus and Lebanon.

U.S. and Israeli policymakers should therefore adopt a phased strategy aimed at advancing a new Middle East framework. It should be centered on a new "three seas" initiative featuring states on the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf—all operating under American leadership. Its overarching purpose would be to sustain the campaign against the Iranian regime, confront other radical forces, preserve regional security, and accelerate economic, political, and technological integration across the region.

The initiative's first step should be to institutionalize the security framework that the United States established during the war. When it began attacking Iran in late February, Washington worked with its Middle Eastern partners to set up an impressive set of air and missile defense systems that protected Iran's neighbors. The United States

coordinated on maritime security, swapped intelligence, and carried out joint counterterrorism efforts with Israel, Arab countries, and some European states—such as Cyprus, France, Greece, and the United Kingdom. These practices should be expanded and formalized so that they outlast this bout of fighting.

Israel, the United States, and Arab countries should also find ways to cooperate on postconflict recovery, such as providing treatment to children traumatized by the bombings. They should work together to shore up their cyberdefenses. And they should tackle some of the resource challenges threatening the Middle East's stability, such as energy, food, and water insecurity. The United States is uniquely positioned to connect Gulf Arab capital and infrastructure, Israeli innovation, and American industrial might into joint ventures that successfully address these issues. A joint endeavor will, in turn, strengthen the region's pragmatic forces and weaken the radical ones that thrive on poverty and instability—Iran included.



A U.S. destroyer firing a Tomahawk missile, February 2026

U.S. Navy / Reuters

A U.S.-Israeli technology partnership and Israel's assistance in addressing these challenges could also help restore the Jewish state's standing among its neighbors. They could thus help lay the groundwork for the final phase of the initiative: the pursuit of continued Arab-Israeli normalization, once conditions allow. (That includes the emergence of a new Israeli government that Arab states see as a trusted partner and that is capable of making productive decisions, including on the Palestinian issue.) Once signed, such deals would both constrain Iran and anchor the Middle East more firmly to the United States at a time of escalating great-power competition, as the region should be. The war has made it clear that Washington is both the primary guarantor of security in the Middle East and the only power capable of gathering Israel and the Arab states under a new, joint architecture.

A normalization deal would have to address the Palestinian question. Arab countries still pay attention to the future of the Palestinians, and this population cannot be ignored. But the agreement doesn't have to solve the issue. Arab governments will have to accept that progress is likely to come through the kind of conditional, institutional approach laid out in Trump's 20-point plan for Gaza, which aims to demilitarize the Gaza Strip, rehabilitate it, and then place it in the hands of a technocratic Palestinian entity that will not threaten Israel. The governing authority will then have to deradicalize both Gaza's and the West Bank's populations, including dismantling armed networks, ending material incentives for violence, and preventing public institutions from inciting attacks. Israel, meanwhile, will need to have the freedom to conduct security operations in Gaza and the West Bank even if they become independent.

Such a lengthy and piecemeal process is unlikely to satisfy those who want an immediate and dramatic resolution. But it is the only way forward—and thankfully, a weaker Iran makes the path easier. If Tehran can no longer strike Israel at will, incite violence along its

borders, or support terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (which have helped spoil every peace process since the 1993 Oslo accords), Iranian officials will struggle to sabotage diplomatic and political efforts to find a solution.

PRESENT AT THE CREATION

The war with Iran is about more than just Iran. It is about whether the Middle East can finally have a hopeful future. The region might remain trapped between recurring proxy conflict, weak state authority, and cycles of ideological mobilization. But a far less powerful regime means the region could become more stable—organized around state interests, U.S.-backed security arrangements, economic interdependence, and Israel's integration.

It is too early to say whether this positive outcome will prevail. Wars often promise strategic transformation yet ultimately change little. But the present moment has created an opening that has not existed in years. If Israel, the United States, and the Gulf states seize this moment, the current campaign won't be remembered as just another chapter in the long-running conflict between Iran and the rest of the region. It will be remembered as the fight that finally brought peace to the Middle East. 🌍