

President Trump Lost This War

Editoriale

The preliminary deal ending President Trump's four-month war with Iran is welcome but brings with it hard truths. Mr. Trump made a terrible mistake starting this war. He [prosecuted it recklessly](#) and in open defiance of the law. The United States is emerging weaker — militarily, diplomatically and economically — and will pay strategic costs for years to come.

The details of the deal are unclear, but [the announced framework](#) suggests that Mr. Trump has won few of the terms he insisted that he would. It is a humiliating comedown for him and the nation he leads.

Since the war began, he has said the United States would achieve “total and complete victory” and that Iran must agree to “unconditional surrender.” He suggested that regime change would occur. He said that Iran would be permitted “no enrichment” of uranium and that “the United States will, working with Iran, dig up and remove all of the deeply buried” near-bomb-grade nuclear material that it already holds.

None of this appears to be true. Iran's hard-line government remains in place. The specifics of the nuclear agreement will apparently be negotiated over the next two months, but the terms seem likely to resemble those of a 2015 deal that President Barack Obama negotiated and that Mr. Trump canceled in 2018. He described the Obama agreement as the [“worst deal ever”](#) and said it put Iran on [“a route to a nuclear weapon.”](#) He criticized it for failing to force Iran to stop supporting terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and for loosening economic sanctions. Yet his destructive war seems likely to leave him with a similar deal.

His biggest achievement in the cease-fire framework is the expected [reopening of the Strait of Hormuz](#) to global shipping traffic, which will eventually reduce the prices of energy and other goods. That, of course, is merely a reversion to the prewar status

quo. Iran closed the strait in retaliation, to damage the global economy and increase political pressure on the United States. The move worked, and Iran's leaders now understand that they hold a powerful economic weapon.

On balance, Iran emerges the strategic winner of the four-month war. It did suffer substantial losses, including much of its navy, air force, military-industrial capacity and political leadership, including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, [who was killed](#) on the war's first day. With the war ending, however, Iran's leadership can begin rebuilding.

The United States, for its part, [looks weaker](#) in the eyes of the world. The American military has shown itself unable to quash a much smaller opponent even as it [burned through](#) many of its long-range precision missiles and interceptors. The outcome damages this country's ability to deter other potential adversaries. To begin to repair the damage, the United States would be wise to mend alliances in Europe, the Middle East and Asia that have been frayed by the war's military and economic effects. The Pentagon will also need to modernize and [prepare for the wars of the future](#). Neither is likely to happen under President Trump.

Before the American and Israeli attack began on Feb. 28, Iran's leadership had endured a miserable two and a half years. The government was far weaker than it had been before the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Hamas, which Iran has long funded and advised. In response to that attack, Israel significantly diminished Hamas and Hezbollah, another Iranian proxy group. In Syria, a murderous, Iran-backed dictator fell while Iran's leaders did little to save him. Israel and the United States exposed Iran's air defenses and missile program as paper tigers when they bombed Iranian nuclear sites last summer, setting back its program. All the while, Iran's currency continued to plummet, and its economy was in ruins. Starting late last year, Iranians took to the streets to protest, and the regime responded by [killing thousands of them](#), if not tens of thousands.

All these problems remain, and Iran is still weaker than it was three years ago. But the war has given it leverage it did not have when 2026 began. Its regime has demonstrated that it can [survive waves of attacks](#) from its two biggest enemies. Its

leaders have not had to abandon their nuclear ambitions. And they have learned that the rest of the world seems unwilling to use military force to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. If Iran chooses to close the strait at some point in the coming months or years, what will Mr. Trump do in response?

We lay out these facts with no pleasure. Iran has been and remains a force for ill. It [represses its own people](#), especially political dissidents, women, L.G.B.T.Q. people and religious minorities. It is a world leader in torture and executions, and it has financed terrorism in its region and far beyond. Iran's leaders have impoverished a country where per capita income was [above the global average](#) as recently as the 1970s.

The regime's distinct brutality should have been reason for the United States to think carefully and plan cautiously for any war. The history of modern American wars, particularly in Iran's region, is full of [hubris that incubated defeat](#). Yet Mr. Trump eschewed thoughtful planning at every step.

He accepted the rose-colored assessment of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, who predicted that the Iranian regime would quickly fall. Mr. Trump dismissed the views of his aides [who told him](#) that Mr. Netanyahu's forecast was farcical. Mr. Trump [ignored the Constitution](#) and refused to seek congressional approval for the war. He did not listen to European and Asian allies who opposed his war. He failed to plan for Iran's obvious ability to close the Strait of Hormuz. He made threats about destroying Iranian civilization that succeeded only in diminishing America's moral standing.

For his sins, he has now agreed to a peace framework that the entire world understands is a defeat for him. It is a setback for America, too.