

# Iran's Long Game

Decades of Preparation Are Paying Off



At an anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli rally in Tehran, Iran, March 2026 Majid Asgaripour / West Asia News Agency / Reuters

Judging by the metrics of conventional conflict, Iran is not faring well against the United States and Israel. Its adversaries are destroying crucial targets in Iran, killing its commanders and degrading its military assets. But these are the wrong measures for assessing Iran's position in the war. The right measure is not even an assessment of whether Iran is absorbing punishment well—which it is. The question that will matter when the fighting ends is whether Tehran is

achieving its strategic objectives. And on that count, Iran is winning.

This outcome is not accidental. Tehran has been preparing for this war for nearly four decades, since the new revolutionary government faced its first major military test in the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988. And it is now executing a strategy that has managed to neutralize key U.S. and Israeli air defense batteries, severely damage U.S. military bases in the Persian Gulf, inflict substantial economic pain, and drive a wedge between the United States and its Gulf allies. The Iranian regime, in other words, is not just surviving the U.S. and Israeli bombardment. The serious economic and political problems it is creating for its adversaries are, on a strategic level, giving Iran the upper hand.

## **THE EDUCATION OF A SUPREME LEADER**

Supreme Leader [Ali Khamenei](#) oversaw the strategic planning that is serving the Iranian regime well in this war. Khamenei, who was killed in the initial U.S.-Israeli airstrikes on February 28, was not the obvious choice to lead the Islamic Republic after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death in 1989. He was not a figure of towering religious authority; his clerical credentials were modest by comparison with those of many of his peers. But his service as Iranian president

during the Iran-Iraq War gave him a political and strategic education that would prove more consequential than any clerical rank.

In Iran, the war with [Iraq](#) is not remembered as a bilateral conflict. Tehran saw it, with good reason, as a proxy war: a campaign in which the United States, the Soviet Union, and much of the Arab world backed Saddam Hussein's Iraq with weapons, intelligence, and diplomatic cover, while Iran, fresh off its 1979 revolution, battled largely alone. Khamenei and the generation of military commanders who fought that war came away with the foundational insight that as long as Iran insisted on sovereignty and independence, it would face sustained, coordinated pressure from the United States—pressure that at any time could turn into war.

Tehran also took away from the Iran-Iraq War a style of asymmetric warfare borne out of necessity. The country was cut off from conventional weapons supplies during the conflict. The [United States](#) had placed a comprehensive arms embargo on Iran in 1979, and most of the world was no longer supplying the country with conventional weapons. Iraq, meanwhile, could draw on Western arms and intelligence, Soviet equipment, and Gulf financing. Facing a conventionally superior enemy while under embargo, Iran had to improvise. It developed tactics such as improvised mine warfare and the use of motivated irregular fighters that

did not depend on expensive hardware or international supply chains.

What began as improvisation evolved into a coherent doctrine. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, founded in the early days of the Iranian revolution and bloodied in the Iraq war, became the institutional home for a strategy of asymmetric deterrence: the creation of a vast military-industrial infrastructure, deliberate cultivation of nonstate allies, forward defense beyond Iran's borders, and projections of force that avoided exposing Iran to direct retaliation. Over the decades that followed, this doctrine was refined and extended. Iran became more deeply involved in Lebanon, where the IRGC helped build [Hezbollah](#) into a genuine military force. After the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iranian-backed militias developed new techniques for fighting the world's most powerful conventional army, including sophisticated roadside bomb networks, intelligence-driven targeting of U.S. personnel, and the use of partner militias to maintain deniability. During the Syrian civil war, beginning in 2011, IRGC advisers and allied militias, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, participated in a complex conflict against an array of opposition forces, jihadist groups, and Western-backed factions, producing a new generation of commanders with advanced operational experience.

By the time the current [war](#) began, Iran had spent 35 years

learning how to fight—and how to survive—against far more powerful adversaries. Those lessons are visible in Iran's conduct today. The same decentralized logistics networks that Iran built to move fighters and materiel through Iraq and Syria are now being used to maintain supply chains under bombardment. The same doctrinal flexibility that made Iranian-backed forces effective against U.S. forces in Iraq—their ability to absorb strikes, disperse, and reconstitute—is what has allowed the IRGC to keep functioning despite the assassination of senior commanders. Decades of preparation have served their purpose.

## **THE ECONOMIC WEAPON**

Iran has long been preparing to fight an economic war, too. For decades, Iran has faced a sanctions regime, constructed primarily by the United States, that has cut the country off from international financial markets, frozen its assets, throttled its oil revenues, and excluded it from the global trading system. This exclusion produced its own strategic logic. A country that has been expelled from the global capitalist system has little stake in preserving that system's architecture—and significant incentive to threaten it. Iran is now doing exactly that. Its targeting of energy infrastructure, its pressure on the Strait of Hormuz, and its strikes on ports, banks, and technology firms across the Gulf are not random acts of escalation. They are a systematic campaign against

the economic foundations of the U.S.-led regional order—an order that was built, in no small part, to contain Iran.

The core component of this campaign involves the Strait of Hormuz, the chokepoint through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil and one-third of its fertilizer travel. Iran cannot fully close the waterway, but it does not need to. The credible threat of disruption is sufficient to rattle energy markets, raise shipping insurance costs, and force the United States to devote enormous military resources to the defensive mission of keeping trade lanes open—resources that could otherwise be used for offensive purposes. Since the mid-1970s, Gulf producers have priced most oil exports in U.S. dollars in exchange for American military protection. Iran, locked out of the petrodollar system itself, is now effectively holding that system hostage. And the consequences will extend beyond the current fighting. Each month that energy markets remain volatile, shipping costs remain elevated, and Gulf investors remain uncertain, the case for dollar-denominated oil settlements weakens at the margins. Iran cannot single-handedly dismantle the system, but it can pursue oil deals in renminbi and accelerate conversations—already underway in Beijing, Moscow, and Riyadh—about alternatives. All of this comes at a low strategic cost to Tehran. For Washington, the cost of defending the strait and the economic structure it supports is much higher.

# DRIVING A WEDGE

The element of Iran's strategy that may have the most lasting consequences, however, is the wedge it is driving between the United States and its partners in the Gulf. Since 1979, Washington has built and maintained a security network across the Gulf designed, fundamentally, to contain Iran. The military bases that Washington initially established on a temporary basis in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates during and after the 1990–91 Gulf War gradually turned into permanent fixtures. The bargain the United States made with these countries was explicit: the Gulf states would align with Washington on matters of regional security, including, later on, by normalizing or at a minimum tolerating the U.S.-Israeli security relationship. In exchange they would receive American security guarantees and the opportunity to prosper within the U.S.-led order.

Tehran interpreted these relationships not merely as collective defense but as an offensive alliance that would eventually come for the Iranian regime. The U.S.-led system, it feared, could be turned against Iran in the event of a conflict, cutting off Iran's trade, strangling its economy, and providing the logistical base for a military campaign that aimed to bring down the Islamic Republic. Tehran also understood that the system's vulnerability lay in its

dependence on Gulf buy-in, which was contingent on the United States' delivering on its security promises. For years, however, any friction was too slight for Iran to exploit. Gulf states may have had misgivings about certain U.S. policies, but they had confidence in the fundamental bargain they had struck.

That confidence began to crack in 2019, when the United States did not defend Saudi Arabia against Iranian strikes on its oil facilities. The cracks deepened further when the United States did not stop Israel from launching a strike on Hamas negotiators in Doha, Qatar, in 2025. The current war has put the U.S.-Gulf bargain under even greater strain. It has exposed an asymmetry in American commitments: U.S. and Israeli air defense systems have been deployed primarily to protect Israel, while the Gulf states have watched their infrastructure burn without equivalent protection. The message received in Abu Dhabi, Doha, Kuwait City, Manama, and Riyadh is that the United States will prioritize Israeli security over Gulf security when forced to choose. Iran has been trying, with limited success, to make this point for decades by ordering targeted strikes that tested Washington's response and warning Gulf publics about U.S. unreliability, including by highlighting the gap between Washington's stated commitments and its actual behavior during wars in Iraq and Gaza. But now, the U.S. war with Iran is driving Tehran's message home.

The Gulf states are not pro-Iranian. They are frightened of Iran and angry about its targeting of their economic assets and infrastructure. But they are also, for the first time in a generation, seriously questioning the value of their alignment with Washington. That doubt is precisely what Iran has been working toward. A Gulf that no longer fully trusts Washington's security guarantees is a Gulf less willing to host American bases, share intelligence, or finance U.S. military operations in the region. Iran's long-term security depends not on defeating the United States militarily but on making the cost of the U.S. presence in the Gulf too politically expensive for its Arab hosts to sustain.

## **THE DECAPITATION PARADOX**

The United States and Israel, meanwhile, are scoring tactical wins but struggling to realize the strategic goals of dismantling Iran's military capacity to threaten the regional order and—as some factions in both governments still hope to do—forcing regime change. They have relied heavily on targeted killings to accomplish their goals, operating under the expectation that eliminating Iranian political leaders and IRGC commanders will degrade Iranian capabilities and deter Iranian action. The theory has not survived contact with reality.

Iran expected such decapitation strikes to feature in any

serious conflict with the United States or [Israel](#). Tehran had watched what the United States and Israel did to their adversaries in recent decades—the targeting of Saddam’s leadership, the systematic assassination of Hezbollah commanders in Lebanon, the killing of the IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani in 2020. And earlier, in the Iran-Iraq War, the loss of commanders had created dangerous vulnerabilities for Tehran. To avoid the same result during a U.S. or Israeli campaign, over the past four decades the regime has deliberately decentralized its military command, distributed political authority across regional nodes that can operate autonomously, and cultivated multiple potential successors at every level of the IRGC and the governing establishment. So far, this strategy has enabled the Iranian regime to withstand the assassination of many high-ranking leaders in the current war.

The decapitation campaign has also created a problem for the United States that Washington appears not to have anticipated: the Iranian commanders who have replaced those killed are, in many respects, more dangerous than their predecessors. They are younger. They fought Americans in Iraq. They fought Israelis in Lebanon and Syria alongside Hezbollah. They believe—with considerable justification—that they helped defeat the most powerful militaries on earth in those theaters. They do not share the caution of the older generation of leaders, who remembered

the catastrophic human costs of the Iran-Iraq War. And they face the institutional pressure that new leaders everywhere face: the need to prove themselves.

The predictable result is that rather than being deterred, Iran's military will become more aggressive. Decapitation may, if anything, accelerate the very escalation it was meant to prevent. And if the Islamic Republic survives this war, it will be led by younger, combat-hardened commanders who believe they defeated the United States and Israel, despite the enormous cost. A postwar Iran with such a leadership will be a more revisionist Iran, not a more moderate one.

## **SURVIVE AND EXHAUST**

Iran's strategic doctrine has a phrase at its center: survive and exhaust. The goal is not to defeat the United States or Israel in any conventional sense. It is to show them both that the cost of confronting Iran is militarily, economically, and politically unsustainable. Tehran's job is to survive punishment long enough, and to inflict enough damage in return, that U.S. and Israeli will for continued conflict collapses.

This strategy is working for now. Iran is absorbing strikes and continuing to function. Its military command has decentralized, and a new generation of commanders is even more willing than the old one to fight. Its economic campaign

is threatening the Gulf order that Washington spent decades building. The wedge between the United States and its Gulf partners is widening, even as those partners reluctantly consider joining Washington in the war. If these trends continue to move in Tehran's favor, the war could end with the Islamic Republic battered but intact while the U.S.-Gulf alliance fractures, threatening to limit the United States' regional power projection for years to come. Iran would emerge weakened in its conventional capabilities but stronger in the one currency that has always mattered most to Tehran: the demonstrated ability to defend its sovereignty against the most powerful militaries in the world. The United States and Israel, with their overwhelming firepower, may be winning the battles. Iran, with 35 years of preparation and a strategy calibrated to outlast rather than outgun, may be winning the war.