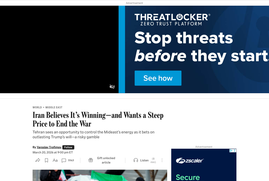

Iran Believes It's Winning—and Wants a Steep Price to End the War

Tehran sees an opportunity to control the Mideast's energy as it bets on outlasting Trump's all-or-nothing gamble

By Jessica Donati and Benoit Faucon

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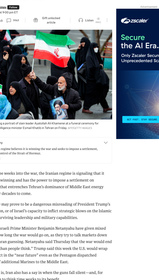

A Iranian holding a portrait of slain leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at a funeral ceremony for assassinated intelligence minister Esmail Khatib in Tehran on Friday. ATTA KENARE/AFP

Quick Summary ^

- The Iranian regime believes it is winning the war and seeks to impose a settlement, including control of the Strait of Hormuz.

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ISTANBUL—Three weeks into the war, the Iranian regime is signaling that it believes it is winning and has the power to impose a settlement on Washington that entrenches Tehran's dominance of Middle East energy resources for decades to come.

This attitude may prove to be a dangerous misreading of President Trump's determination, or of Israel's capacity to inflict strategic blows on the Islamic Republic's surviving leadership and military capabilities.

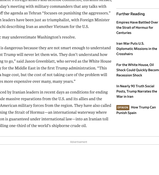
Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have given mixed signals on how long the war would go on, as they try to talk markets down and keep Tehran guessing. Netanyahu said Thursday that the war would end "a lot faster than people think." Trump said this week the U.S. would wrap up the conflict in the "near future" even as the Pentagon dispatched thousands of additional Marines to the Middle East.

The problem is, Iran also has a way to write the game full-stop—and, for now, it seems to think time works to its benefit.

Despite optimistic U.S. and Israeli pronouncements about destroying launchers and missile stocks, Iran has retained the ability to fire dozens of ballistic missiles, and many more drones, every day across the Middle East.

Instead of declining, the rate of fire actually picked up in recent days compared with 10 days ago. Iranian strikes inflicted catastrophic damage this week on key energy installations in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Persian Gulf Arab Emirates—while Iran's own oil exports kept booming.

Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf's chokepoint, remains only possible with Iranian permission. Surging oil and gas prices, meanwhile, are exacting growing pain on economies worldwide—and putting pressure on Trump to end the war that he began in expectation of swift victory on Feb. 28.



Aircraft flying in Qatar's Doha airspace, last month, after an Iranian attack. ALI HABIB/REUTERS

"The Iranians aren't ready to end the war because they have learned an important lesson. They can withstand a long, and clearly, costly list of damage and disruption. They now want the whole world to learn that lesson, too," said Dina Esfandiary, an analyst on Iran and author of a book on Iran's foreign relations.

Seeing its leverage, Tehran has pledged that it will agree to a cease-fire only if Washington and the Gulf states pay a steep price. The spokesman of the Iranian Parliament's foreign affairs and defense committee, Ebrahim Rezaei, said after Friday's meeting with military commanders that any talks with the U.S. and the agenda for Tehran "focuses on punishing the aggressors." Other Iranian leaders have been just as triumphant, with Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi describing Iran as another Vietnam for the U.S.

That rhetoric may underestimate Washington's resolve.

"This hubris is dangerous because they are not smart enough to understand that President Trump will never let them win. They don't understand how far he's willing to go," said Jason Greenblatt, who served as the White House special envoy for the Middle East in the first Trump administration. "This can come at a huge cost, but the cost of not taking care of the problem will be many times more expensive over many, many years."

Demands voiced by Iranian leaders in recent days as conditions for ending the war include massive reparations from the U.S. and its allies and the expulsion of American military forces from the region. They have also called for transforming the Strait of Hormuz—an international waterway where free navigation is guaranteed under international law—into an Iranian toll booth controlling one third of the world's shipborne crude oil.

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Iran is planning to enshrine a "new status" for the Strait of Hormuz to require every passing ship to pay fees to Tehran for the privilege, Expediency Council member Mohammad Mokhber, an adviser to the supreme leader on economic affairs, told the country's Mehr news agency. "Iran will earn its position from a sanctioned country to an enhanced power in the region and the world," he said. "We will sanction those domination-seeking arrogant powers."

It is hard to imagine the U.S.—or the Gulf states—accepting such an arrangement. Trump has repeatedly vowed to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, by force if necessary, and has ordered Marine expeditionary units to sail to the Middle East. A U.S. effort to secure shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz would be "a simple military maneuver" with "little risk," Trump said Friday in a Truth Social post blaming European allies for refusing to join the mission.

A Iranian missile launcher in Mazandaran Province, on Caspian Sea, through the Strait of Hormuz last month. STATE MEDIA VIA ZUMA PRESS, INC.

In the age of drones and portable antiship missiles, retaking the Strait of Hormuz would be anything but simple, but not impossible, military experts say. Round-the-clock intelligence and surveillance flights that are now available because of U.S. air superiority, combined with rapid targeting of Iranian weapons systems, could make all the difference, said retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies.

"It's not something that is going to happen overnight, but over time the Strait of Hormuz will be open back to the levels of shipping that we saw before this conflict broke out. It is a reasonable estimate that it will be a matter of weeks," he said. "The Iranians are not going to end up with control over the strait, we are."

Indeed, the geopolitical implications of allowing Iran to end up in charge of the strategic waterway would be unacceptable, said Suman Vakil, director of the Chatham House think tank's Middle East and North Africa program. "If the U.S. cuts and runs, leaving Iran's Islamic Republic to do what it does best—hold everyone hostage—then the war will be a categorical failure for the United States and President Trump," she said.

Even if Trump were to leave Iran in control of the Strait of Hormuz under pressure from markets or voters seeking a quick end to the war, the arrangement likely won't be sustainable for a long time, leading to an imminent new round of warfare, diplomats and analysts say.

"This would not be a very tolerable or acceptable situation for the Gulf states, and I wouldn't have thought that it would be tolerable or acceptable for a lot of the Gulf's energy clients—not even for China, and certainly not for India and Japan," said Robin Mills, chief executive of the Dubai-based Qamar Energy consulting firm. "Even for the U.S., the humiliation would at some point prompt Trump, or someone else, to come back and try to change that."

While the Iranian leadership currently possesses significant leverage for a deal with the U.S. if it chose to negotiate, it also holds a record of sticking to unrealistically rigid policies since the early days of the Islamic Republic, said Alex Vatanka, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute and author of a book on U.S.-Iranian relations. Back during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran liberated every inch of its territory by 1982—but only agreed to a cease-fire with Saddam Hussein's regime in 1988, after massive destruction and hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides, he noted.

"The Iranian side has a history of not taking opportunities, on the diplomatic front and on the military front," he said. "This regime cares a lot about the optics, about the shapes, about not looking weak. But it's not just the Iranians who can miscalculate. The United States can also miscalculate."

With all its horrors, the Iran-Iraq war also created the foundational myth of the Islamic Republic, cementing its power for the ensuing decades. The regime's most dangerous enemy now is the Iranian people. The Islamic Republic killed thousands of protesters as it suppressed demonstrations in January.

The current conflict may provide the regime—if it survives—with renewed strength at home, cautioned Nicole Grajewski, an expert on Iran and a professor at the Sciences Po university in Paris. "The regime could play this off as a new Iran-Iraq war," she said. "There is an outcome of this war that makes the regime more entrenched and more militarized, with a new mythology around survival and around managing its enthroned the U.S. and Israel."

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Jessica Donati is the chief foreign affairs correspondent of The Wall Street Journal, covering major global events and U.S. foreign policy. Benoit Faucon is a Middle East correspondent based in Istanbul. In 2024, we was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2023 for his coverage of the war in Ukraine and in...

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