

Iran's forever war: Deal or no deal, Iran's challenge to America will outlast Trump

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Analysis by

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Shortly after I landed in Baghdad for the first time in January 2004, US intelligence services intercepted a letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq. The letter discussed the use of ruthless violence to establish an Islamic caliphate— first inside Iraq and ultimately across the broader Middle East.

“The greatest battle of Islam in this era is now being waged,” Zawahiri wrote.

The United States publicized the letter, but few took seriously the idea that al Qaeda could carve out and govern territory across the heart of the Arab world.

Ten years later, I was back in Baghdad as Zarqawi's successor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, conquered Iraq's second-largest city and declared a caliphate spanning territory the size of Indiana with millions living under its rule. We spent the next decade dismantling it.

The lesson stayed with me: When leaders openly declare long-term ideological objectives and repeatedly demonstrate a willingness to use violence to achieve them, take them seriously.

That lesson applies to Iran.

Different presidents, same challenge

For nearly five decades, American presidents of both parties have approached Iran with different combinations of diplomacy, sanctions, deterrence and military force. Yet the conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic persists because the central driver of Iran's behavior has remained remarkably constant: the revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic itself.

The debate in Washington often focuses on tactics. Democrats tend to prioritize diplomacy and cite President Barack Obama's 2015 nuclear agreement with Tehran as the best available mechanism to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions and avoid war. Republicans often favor “maximum pressure” campaigns and military deterrence, arguing Iran exploits diplomatic arrangements while continuing regional aggression.

Both arguments contain elements of truth. Neither fully explains the continuity of the problem.

The throughline is not shifting political winds in Washington, but rather the enduring nature of the Iranian regime and the objectives embedded in the Islamic Republic since 1979.

Nothing that President Donald Trump is now reportedly discussing with Iran — a transactional deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and perhaps impose new nuclear limits — would alter what has been a fixed 47-year course.

The Islamic Republic's ideology

Iran's constitution assigns the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, not merely a defensive military role but what it calls an "ideological mission of jihad in God's way." Over decades, Iran's revolutionary leadership has interpreted that mission as extending Iranian influence across the Middle East, expelling the US from the region, and supporting armed movements committed to Israel's destruction.

Those goals have transcended American and Iranian presidents, economic crises, sanctions campaigns, and diplomatic openings.

They explain the pattern of attacks, hostage-taking, terrorism, and proxy warfare that has defined Iran's relationship with the US since the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in 1979. They also explain Iran's sustained investment in militant organizations across the region, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iraqi militias and the Houthis.

The IRGC was specifically designed to guard the revolution at home and advance it abroad. Its expeditionary arm, the Quds Force, spent decades building networks of armed partners capable of projecting Iranian influence far beyond Iran's borders.

At various moments, American policymakers hoped Iran's revolutionary zeal might moderate in exchange for economic opportunity and reintegration into the international system. That hope was part of the strategic logic behind the Obama administration's nuclear agreement.

The JCPOA placed meaningful constraints on Iran's nuclear program for a period and in that sense was an achievement. But it did not alter Iran's regional conduct or revolutionary aims. In some respects, Tehran — flush with new economic resources — appeared increasingly confident afterwards.

Shortly after the agreement was concluded, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei dismissed suggestions that Iran's posture toward Israel or the US would soften. He publicly [predicted](#) that Israel would not exist within 25 years and vowed continued resistance throughout the region.

Like Zawahiri, that boast was not rhetorical theater. It aligned with the trajectory Iran had followed for decades.

October 7 as culmination

October 7, 2023, represented the clearest manifestation yet of that trajectory.

Hamas — armed, financed, and supported by Iran over many years — launched the deadliest attack in Israel's history, killing more than 1,200 people and taking more than 250 hostages. Most governments around the world condemned the atrocities. Iran's leadership instead celebrated them

and what it described as resistance against Israel.

Within days, Iranian-backed groups across the region joined the conflict. Hezbollah began firing rockets from Lebanon into northern Israel. Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria launched repeated attacks against American forces. The Houthis in Yemen began targeting commercial shipping and American naval assets in the Red Sea.

All of this reflected decades of Iranian investment in a network designed precisely for this purpose: applying pressure against Israel and the US through multiple fronts while maintaining varying degrees of deniability.

Iran eventually launched two unprecedented direct missile and drone attacks against Israel from Iranian territory itself — before Israel had directly attacked Iran.

Trump's approach hits limits

Trump is the first president to directly target senior Iranian military leadership and later authorize military operations inside Iranian territory itself.

Some of those actions produced tangible tactical results. The killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in 2020 disrupted Iran's regional operations. Subsequent strikes against Iranian military infrastructure and nuclear facilities significantly degraded parts of Iran's missile, drone and nuclear programs.

But tactical military success alone does not produce strategic outcomes.

Indeed, the events of the past few months have underscored the limits of military power alone when confronting a deeply entrenched revolutionary system. While battered, Iran's system appears to have consolidated with leading roles for hardened ideologues like Ahmad Vahedi, the IRGC's new leader — who led the Quds Force through much of the 1980s and 1990s.

American tactics — military, diplomatic, economic — can be effective at degrading Iranian capabilities, but they have proven wholly ineffective at changing the ideological course of the Iranian regime itself.

No end in sight

Even with rumors of a deal around the corner, Iran's new Supreme Leader doubled down on his late father's aims to eject America from the Middle East, and to eliminate the state of Israel. "From now on," he wrote this week, "Death to America, and Death to Israel will be the common slogans of the Islamic Ummah."

For good measure, he reaffirmed his late father's vow to see Israel eliminated by the year 2040 — a boast Israel has no choice but to take seriously.

Israel, in turn, may have a new government following elections later this year, but its more proactive security doctrine after October 7 is unlikely to change. It will act on threats as they arise, whether close to its borders or within Iran itself including against Iran's missile program.

The United States will also act to defend itself and its interests. This week, even as Washington and Tehran negotiated to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, the IRGC was caught laying new mines in the Strait — leading to a military exchange.

This reality — Iran's defining ideology, Israel's penchant to act against perceived threats and America's protection of its own interests and personnel — will create ongoing challenges for Trump and his successor. Until there is political change in Iran, we should expect a recurring cycle of confrontation, temporary de-escalation and renewed confrontation.

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He was the special presidential envoy for the [global coalition to counter ISIL](#). He was appointed to this post by Obama in October 2015 and was retained in that role by the [Trump administration](#) until 2018. McGurk had been slated to leave the post in mid-February 2019, but announced his resignation in December following Trump's decision to withdraw troops from [Syria](#).

McGurk also served as deputy assistant secretary of state for [Iraq](#) and [Iran](#) and from October 2014 through January 2016, and led secret negotiations with Iran that led to a prisoner swap and release of four Americans from Iran. He earlier served under President George W. Bush as special assistant to the president and senior director for Iraq and Afghanistan, and under President Barack Obama as a senior advisor to the National Security Council and U.S. ambassador to Iraq.