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Introduction to the Special Issue on the Iran War

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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The attack by the United States and Israel on Iran in February set in motion a wave of political and economic repercussions not just in the Middle East, but across the globe. As professors at NYU Abu Dhabi, we observed these consequences firsthand as classes went remote, campus closed, and our students were sent home. These difficulties in Abu Dhabi pale in comparison to the direct consequences of violence for civilians in Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the UAE—to say nothing of the enormous economic costs confronting families all over the world following the disruption of virtually all shipping through the Strait of Hormuz for months.

Given the enormity of these events, it is not surprising that the fast pace and unpredictability of developments resist ready analysis, much less prognostication about the future. As this introduction is being written, a sharp escalation in rhetoric has been followed by a resumption of violence after more than a month of relative calm, and it remains unclear whether this escalation will spiral back into full-blown conflict or give way to another round of negotiations.

In an attempt to better understand these developments, we reached out to contributors and asked them to reflect on the domestic fac-

tors that are most important for understanding the conflict and its repercussions in their own countries of expertise. These contributions span shifts in public opinion across the Middle East and the role of domestic politics and institutions in the GCC states, Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel. In the remainder of this introduction, we briefly describe each contribution and highlight how their insights fit together.

Lisa Blaydes' article highlights the extensive environmental, demographic, and economic ties that bind Iran and its GCC neighbors: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Her contribution emphasizes that despite the current tensions, extensive linkages through the Iranian diaspora, a shared dependence on the regular passage of maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, and a common reliance on the environmental sanctity of the Persian Gulf—especially for the desalination plants that are vital across the region—mean that the fates of these states remain bound to Iran's. Precisely because exit from this interdependence is impossible, Blaydes concludes that negotiation and accommodation are the only means by which a return to a more stable regional paradigm is achievable.



As [Andrew Leber's](#) article makes clear, however, there are important disparities between Saudi Arabia and its geographically and demographically much smaller "brother" countries in the GCC. While there was certainly no love lost between Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), and the Iranian regime, Saudi Arabia, like its neighbors in the GCC, found itself "dragged" into the current conflict. Yet the meaningful similarities between these regional allies essentially stop there. Saudi Arabia enjoys far more strategic distance from Iran than any other Gulf State: its sheer size, its Red Sea ports, and its east-west pipeline infrastructure provide it with numerous options for importing goods and exporting its oil that are simply unavailable to Kuwait, Bahrain, or Qatar. These key strategic advantages, combined with some hard-won foreign policy lessons from the past nine years, help explain why MBS resisted American pressure to join the fighting and instead invested Saudi diplomatic energy in finding a negotiated off-ramp. While tensions with the Iranian-supported Houthi government in Sana'a remain particularly important to watch, Saudi Arabia retains far more discretion than its neighbors in charting its own diplomatic path with respect to Iran.

[Mohammad Ali Kadivar's](#) insightful discussion of domestic politics within Iran highlights the enormous emotional and historical resonance of anti-imperialist politics for both Iranian elites and the public. While it was difficult for the current regime to square the mass repression of protestors in January 2026, just prior to the outbreak of the war, with this anti-imperialist vision, under the direct threat of American and Israeli bombs the Iranian regime suddenly enjoyed far more leeway to present itself as a genuinely revolutionary force resisting imperial aggression. The regime has suffered significant setbacks in the current conflict—above all the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Yet, as Kadivar shows, the regime's resilience followed long-established pat-

terns: fallen officials were quickly replaced and loyalist mobilization filled the streets. Any domestic protest movement, the single greatest threat to the regime prior to the war, now faces significant headwinds. Furthermore, simply by enduring the US and Israeli air campaign, while credibly threatening key regional allies of the United States, and crucial shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz, the Iranian government is well placed to frame its survival as a victory, and to further burnish its revolutionary bona fides not only in the Middle East, but across the globe.

Whether this strategic framing resonates beyond Iran's borders is taken up by [Amaney Jamal and Michael Robbins](#), who draw on the latest wave of the Arab Barometer to document a marked decline in regional public support for both the United States and Israel following Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 and Israel's devastating response. While more conclusive evidence must await the completion of the next wave of surveys, Jamal and Robbins emphasize that although respondents across the region remain generally wary of Iranian foreign policy—majorities continue to view Iran's nuclear program and regional influence as threatening—many perceive Iran as a champion of the Palestinian cause, offsetting to some degree their concerns about other aspects of Iran's geopolitics. Of greater concern for the United States, widespread dissatisfaction with US foreign policy toward Israel appears to be pushing Arab publics toward regional rivals such as Russia and China. And because the current crisis has forestalled widely popular initiatives to rebuild Gaza, while the prospect of an independent Palestine seems ever more remote, official policies normalizing relations with Israel are likely to become even less popular, a potentially risky flashpoint for future domestic conflict across US allies in the region.



Nowhere is the entanglement of international conflict and domestic politics more devastating than in Lebanon, the subject of [Christiana Parreira's](#) contribution. There, the war between the United States and Iran has unfolded alongside a distinct but closely entangled conflict between Israel and Hezbollah—at once an Iranian-backed, armed, non-state actor, but also a key governing party in Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990. Parreira documents how the war has accelerated shifts at both the elite and mass levels of Lebanese politics: the government has declared Hezbollah's armed presence illegal and entered direct negotiations with Israel for the first time since 1993, while recent surveys indicate that clear majorities of every major sect other than Shia Muslims now favor Hezbollah's disarmament. Yet, as she argues, these shifts have not translated into decisive action. Divisions within the government and the army's reluctance to confront Hezbollah directly, together with the party's remaining military capacity and its enduring legitimacy and clientelist service provision among its Shia base, continue to preclude disarmament from within. With Israel conditioning the withdrawal of its occupying forces on disarmament, and the Lebanese state conditioning disarmament on withdrawal, Parreira soberly concludes that, absent a diplomatic breakthrough, Lebanon faces a continuing stalemate punctuated by catastrophic violence, with increasingly dire consequences for the Lebanese public.

While the contributions above trace the war's reverberations across the region, [Elizabeth Saunders](#) turns to where the war began: Washington. Drawing on insights from American politics, international relations, and comparative politics, her trenchant assessment shows how the consolidation of power in the presidency, the steady erosion of the power of front-line bureaucrats, and corruption influenced President Trump's decision to join Israel in its assault on Tehran. The steady aggrandizement of the president's war powers, combined

with polarization and a declining willingness to engage in oversight—especially of military conflicts—has sidelined Congress's traditional role as a check on executive power. And any hope that dissenting perspectives from within the State Department or the Department of Defense might at least provide the president with an assessment of the likely risks attacking Iran was foreclosed by the administration's careful choice of secretaries unlikely to oppose the president even in private, and by the systematic gutting of the front-line bureaucrats in both the Department of State and Defense who might have seriously weighed the conflict's likely repercussions for US interests. The combination of weakened congressional oversight and a hollowed-out bureaucracy leads Saunders to the reluctant conclusion that, in the realm of national security, the United States now operates as a "personalist" regime—and reinforces the need to draw on insights from across the discipline's subfields to understand the likely contours and ramifications of the current conflict.

The interconnectedness of domestic and international politics is equally apparent in [Mark Tessler's](#) careful assessment of the political situation in Israel. As in Lebanon, and in public opinion across the Arab world, the essential background is the trauma of October 2023 and the wars that followed. Drawing on a wide range of Israeli public opinion data, Tessler documents a complicated national mood: deeply negative judgments of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu coexist with strong support for the military campaign in Lebanon and little sympathy for Palestinian suffering in Gaza, while nearly three-quarters of Israelis report that there is no political party in which they feel at home. How Israelis apportion responsibility for the failures of the past three years is likely to prove essential in determining whether the right-wing bloc led by Likud—dependent on extremist coalition partners—or the centrist alliance arrayed against it prevails in the national elections approaching



later this year, with enormous consequences for Israel and the region.

Taken together, these contributions make clear that the 2026 Iran War cannot be understood in its origins, its conduct, or its consequences without sustained attention to domestic politics. Public opinion, elite bargains, institutions, and regime dynamics shape how states enter, endure, and exit wars. They also demonstrate the enduring value of area expertise and cross-subfield dialogue. Events will no doubt have moved on by the time this issue reaches readers; we hope these essays nonetheless offer a useful framework for understanding whatever comes next.





The Iran War

THE SMALL GULF STATES AND THE IRAN WAR

by Lisa Blaydes



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In the years leading up to the Iran War, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf region generally pursued forms of diplomatic rapprochement with Tehran, betting that improving relations would serve as the basis for a stable regional framework upon which each state might pursue their own interests.¹ As beneficiaries of protection under a U.S. security umbrella, this seemed like a reasonable wager. A cooling down of political tensions reduced conflict risk, allowing the “small” Gulf states—defined by scholars as including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—to embark on dynamic and ambitious economic projects.² In this context,

The societies on the two sides of the Persian Gulf have long been deeply connected, through historical population transfers, shared environmental resources, and vulnerability to common economic shocks

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates emerged as critical hubs for global energy production, transportation, and tourism.

The pursuit of a diplomatic softening toward Tehran was not sufficient to protect the small Gulf countries from Iranian attacks, however. Tehran’s decision to extend targeting beyond military sites to civilian infrastructure like airports, government buildings, and luxury hotels was especially painful. The revealed vulnerability of the small Gulf states in the face of Iranian drone and missile attacks emphasized a number of critical lessons, including the limits of superficial rapprochement with Iran and the defense gaps associated with American security guarantees.

The interdependence and interconnection between the Gulf states and Iran is

1 For example, top Iranian and Saudi security officials met in Beijing in March 2023 to discuss a new state of bilateral engagement. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi hosted the Iranian Foreign Minister in June 2023. Bahrain and Iran agreed in June 2024 to take steps aimed at restoring diplomatic ties.

2 See *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, Editors Khalid Al-Mezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (Routledge, 2017) for a discussion of how to

conceptualize countries like Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates in both regional and international politics. Other scholarly accounts exclude Oman from their discussion of the small states of the Gulf region. While these states are small from a territorial perspective and in terms of population size, they tend to play an out-sized role in areas related to energy production, international diplomacy, and soft-power projection.



nothing new. This is perhaps even more so for the small, “city-states” of the region when compared to Saudi Arabia, a much larger state which enjoys its own diverse, regional geographies. The societies on the two sides of the Persian Gulf have long been deeply connected, through historical population transfers, shared environmental resources, and vulnerability to common economic shocks.

Interdependence and Interconnection across the Gulf

Countries of the Gulf have long been demographically, economically, and environmentally interconnected. Cities like Doha, Dubai and Kuwait City are home to Iranian nationals and Iranian-descent citizen populations. It is reported that as many as 500,000 Iranian nationals live in the UAE, particularly Dubai, in addition to a sizable percentage of Emirati citizens of Iranian background.³ A significant percentage of Kuwaiti Shi’a are also of Iranian descent, some with family ties and connections to Iran. When intercepted missile debris fell at random on a Kuwait City household in March 2026, an 11-year-old Iranian national was among the first war casualties in Kuwait.⁴

While sectarian tensions in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE tend to be well-managed, the Iran conflict has the potential to foment communal sentiment. Shi’a citizens of the Gulf states may be more sensitive than others when witnessing human suffering in Iran. Hundreds of Gulf residents have been arrested, accused of expressing solidarity with the Iranian people or mourning the death of former supreme leader Ali Khamenei, a figure who enjoyed both political and religious authority.⁵

3 Amin Moghadam, “The Other Shore: Iranians in the United Arab Emirates Between Visibility and Invisibility,” *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, Editors, Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

4 “Iranian Strike Kills 11-year-old Iranian in Kuwait,” *Middle East Eye*, March 4 2026.

5 Amnesty International, “Gulf States: More than 1,000 Arrested in Sweeping War-Related Crackdown on Expression,” June 1 2026.

The small Gulf states are also connected to Iran through geographic proximity and a shared natural environment. The Iranian city of Bushehr is home to Iran’s only nuclear power plant. Located just 150 nautical miles from Kuwait City and 160 nautical miles to Manama, populations across the Gulf are concerned about the possibility of radioactive fallout should the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant be bombed in US or Israeli air campaigns. These concerns became particularly salient in March 2026 when a location close to the power plant was hit in a military assault. Downstream impacts of an attack include contamination of the waters of the Persian Gulf which feed vital desalination systems across the region. Iranian officials have stated that an attack on Bushehr is likely to threaten Gulf capitals to a much greater degree than the Iranian capital city of Tehran given the geographic proximity of these cities to Bushehr.⁶

Likewise, an attack on the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant in Abu Dhabi could have a similarly catastrophic environmental effect. Located 150 nautical miles from Doha, concerns about the safe operation of this facility became heightened after an Iranian drone attack led to a fire at an electrical generator inside the perimeter of the plant.⁷ A worst-case scenario would involve a strike against Bushehr or Barakah, followed by a retaliatory strike against the other, resulting in two nuclear fallout zones in the relatively small geographic area of the Persian Gulf.

The conflict has also highlighted the reliance of the small Gulf states and Iran alike on the strategic Strait of Hormuz chokepoint. Countries like Kuwait and Qatar are heavily dependent on the strait for the export of Gulf energy. At the same time, the U.S. counter-blockade of the strait has been damaging for Iran. This has led all impacted countries in the Gulf region to review their basic

6 “Why an Attack on Bushehr Nuclear Plant Would be Catastrophic for the Gulf,” *Al Jazeera*, April 5 2026.

7 Andrew Dowell, Laurence Norman, and Summer Said, “Drone Strike Sparks Fire Near UAE Nuclear Plant,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 17 2026.



interests and approach to trade.

Diplomatic Sensitivities

Iranian-sponsored militias operating in Iraq have been responsible for hundreds of rocket and drone strikes targeting Gulf neighbors. In many cases, these militias possess sophisticated arsenals including ballistic missiles and anti-aircraft weapons.⁸ For example, multiple drone and missile strikes originating in Iraq targeted Kuwaiti military sites, including National Guard facilities. A spokesman from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Defense acknowledged that Kuwaiti border positions were targeted with “explosive-laden drones” that originated from within Iraqi territory.⁹ Attacks of this type are a sensitive subject for Kuwait, activating memories of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In recent years, Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations had thawed. In 2023, Iraq hosted the Arabian Gulf Cup soccer tournament for the first time since 1979. The event offered the opportunity to strengthen ties between Iraq and other Gulf countries.¹⁰ In 2024, 5,000 Iraqi soccer fans were permitted to visit Kuwait for a World Cup qualifying match; this was the first time large numbers of Iraqi visitors were allowed into Kuwait since the invasion.¹¹ The improvement in bilateral relations will likely slow in the wake of attacks on Kuwait emanating from within Iraqi territory, however.

The Iran War also serves as a difficult test for states that have sought to establish their reputations as regional and global mediators. Over the last two decades, the Qatari regime has demonstrated a willingness to work toward diplomatic solutions to a variety of thorny conflicts, including in Yemen, Lebanon, Sudan, and Afghanistan as well as between Israel and Hamas and between

Russia and Ukraine. Qatar views itself as a “neutral, reliable, and responsible mediator” whose efforts are enshrined in Article 7 of the Qatari constitution, which states that a key feature of the country’s foreign policy is “based on the principle of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes.”¹² Qatar enjoys credibility as a result of its extensive humanitarian work and pledges of investment to support peace deals,¹³ yet mediating with Tehran has proven to be challenging.

The conflict also serves as a critical test for Oman, which has long sought to project a position of political neutrality with regard to regional disputes. Omani officials pride themselves for their diplomatic pragmatism and Muscat is the only one of the small Gulf states that has maintained friendly diplomatic relations with Tehran throughout the war.¹⁴ An agreement for management of the Strait of Hormuz has been elusive, however, despite Muscat’s efforts to serve as a diplomatic bridge between Iran and other states. Efforts to create a safe, toll-free shipping route modeled on management of the Strait of Malacca have failed.¹⁵ Iran also retaliated when Muscat sought to open a southern route in Omani territorial waters, a strategy developed by Omani diplomats in consultation with the UN’s International Maritime Organization.¹⁶ The International Crisis Group has assessed that a failure to reach a stable arrangement on reopening the Strait of Hormuz will lead to far-reaching consequences for global energy markets and food security.¹⁷

8 Missy Ryan, Nancy Youssef, and Shane Harris, “What the Pentagon Didn’t Say About a Deadly Crash,” *The Atlantic*, May 19 2026.

9 “Kuwait Announces New Attack Launched from Iraq,” *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, April 24 2026.

10 Mustafa Salim, “How a Soccer Tournament in Iraq Became a Celebration of Arab Unity,” *Washington Post*, January 18 2023.

11 Timour Azhari and Ahmed Hagagy, “Pitch Politics: Iraq-Kuwait Soccer Match Tests Post-Saddam Ties,” *Reuters*, September 10 2024.

12 “Mediation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar.

13 Sultan Barakat, “Qatari Mediation: Between Ambition and Achievement,” Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, No. 12, November 2014.

14 Giorgio Cafiero, “Oman Walks Tightrope with Iran across the Strait of Hormuz,” *Responsible Statecraft*, April 16 2026.

15 Vivian Nereim, Farnaz Fassihi, and Erika Solomon, “After U.S.-Iran War, Oman Said to Propose Hormuz Fee Plan,” *New York Times*, June 30 2026.

16 Patrick Wintour, “Iran is Jealously Competing with Oman as Decision-maker over Strait of Hormuz,” *The Guardian*, June 29 2026.

17 “The State of the Strait: The Role of Hormuz in the Middle East War So Far,” International Crisis Group, May 29 2026.



The Rise of Repressive Tactics

Arab Gulf states have sought to silence expression since the conflict began. Amnesty International reports that over 1,000 people have been arrested as part of a region-wide crackdown on free expression. Shortly after the war began, all six Gulf Cooperation Council countries issued warnings against sharing online content about the conflict with Bahrain and Kuwait meting out prison sentences for between three and 10 years for the accused.¹⁸ This crackdown was reportedly in support of national security where “rumors” and “false information” might generate a security risk, justifying the use of repressive measures.

In one highly publicized case, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, a prominent Kuwaiti-American journalist, was detained for several weeks, charged with spreading false information, harming national security, and misusing his mobile phone after making comments online and sharing a video of a US fighter jet that had crashed in Kuwait.¹⁹ His Kuwaiti citizenship – as well as the citizenship of his sisters – was withdrawn shortly thereafter. The Arab Gulf states already have some of the worst press freedom scores in the world according to Reporters without Borders.²⁰

The use of citizenship withdrawal as a cudgel to pressure domestic populations has become a popular tool for Arab Gulf incumbents. In the last few years, up to

The small Gulf states have long been vulnerable to larger, more powerful neighbors, with the recent experience of the Iran conflict reiterating forms of strategic vulnerability. Concerns about the US commitment to Gulf defense may lead these states to hedge and diversify their options moving forward

one-fifth of the Kuwaiti population has been denaturalized as part of a broader move toward a “blood and soil” conceptualization of Kuwaiti citizenship. With the emergence of the conflict, Kuwaitis have been less likely to express their discontent with continued regime efforts at denaturalization and disenfranchisement. Criticizing the government while under attack from a foreign country feels, to many Kuwaitis, as poorly timed.

In Bahrain, 69 citizens were stripped of their Bahraini nationality following accusations that they had glorified the Iranian attacks or colluded with the enemy. All were reportedly Shi’a Muslims of Iranian heritage.²¹ In Bahrain, citizens of non-Bahraini origin can be stripped of citizenship if they are deemed to have caused harm to the country or shown disloyalty.²² When three lawmakers questioned the legality of the citizenship revocations, they were dismissed from parliament.²³

Options for the Future

The small Gulf states have long been vulnerable to larger, more powerful neighbors, with the recent experience of the Iran conflict reiterating forms of strategic vulnerability. Con-

cerns about the US commitment to Gulf defense may lead these states to hedge and diversify their options moving forward. Yet alternatives are few. It is unclear if China has either the political will or strategic interest to provide security guarantees for the small Gulf countries. China would likely continue supporting Iran over the

18 Amnesty International, “Gulf States,” June 1 2026.

19 Vivian Nereim, “Journalist Detained in Kuwait Says He was Stripped of Citizenship,” *New York Times*, April 30 2026.

20 See Reporters without Borders, World Press Freedom Index.

21 “Authorities Strip Citizenship from Dozens of Bahrainis,” Human Rights Watch, April 2026.

22 Daniel Khalili-Tari, “Bahrain Strips 69 People of Citizenship over Iran Support,” *Al Jazeera*, April 27 2026.

23 “Bahraini Lawmakers Face Backlash for Questioning Citizenship Revocations,” *New Lines Magazine*, May 5 2026.



Arab Gulf states in the event of a prolonged conflict. In addition, most Arab Gulf citizens do not hold favorable views about China's economic rise, suggesting domestic support for a pivot to China may also be limited.²⁴

Ultimately, Iran and the small Gulf countries will continue to be linked through historical population transfers, a shared natural environment, and common reliance on the global energy market for their economies. Over the longer term, this suggests the need for these states to seek some reasonable accommodation in order to pursue the economic development objectives required to weather the global energy sector's impending shift away from fossil fuel-based systems of consumption and production.

24 Lisa Blaydes, "'Selling' China in the Arab Gulf States: Economic Insecurity and Attitudes Toward Chinese Growth," *Studies in Comparative International Development* (2025).





The Iran War

HOW DOMESTIC CONCERNS DROVE SAUDI ARABIA'S IRAN-WAR RESPONSE

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Saudi Arabia was quickly dragged into the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, with drone and missile strikes by Iran and Iran-backed proxies striking targets inside the kingdom and the United States using Saudi-based airbases and airspace to carry out strikes on Iran. Publicly, at least, Saudi Arabia rejected the Trump administration's suggestions that it join in the fighting, instead coordinating with regional powers such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Türkiye.

What explains Saudi Arabia's positioning during the Iran war – tacitly lending some support to the United States but otherwise investing its foreign-policy time and energy into a negotiated deal to wind down the war? During the war, Saudi Arabia faced direct attacks by Iran on Saudi soil, not-so-subtle pressure from the Trump administration to join the war, and outbidding from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which touted its willingness to take the battle to Tehran (and tacitly acknowledged doing so). Still, de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and top diplomats like Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan mostly sought to contain the fallout from the fighting rather than escalating the conflict, working with regional middle powers like Egypt and Pakistan to find a diplomatic off-

ramp to the U.S.-Iran front of the war (Muasher, 2026).

This positioning is surprising to those familiar with the extent of the Iran-Saudi geopolitical rivalry during the 2010s, and especially MBS' bellicose statements about Iran earlier in his tenure as de facto ruler. To domestic audiences, the Crown Prince asserted that the Iranian regime was incapable of diplomatic dialogue and pledged to ensure that any Saudi-Iran fighting "is there in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia." (Al-Arabiya English staff writer, 2017) In speaking to U.S. audiences, he went beyond calling Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "the new Hitler" to assert that the former Iranian Supreme Leader "makes Hitler look good." (Friedman, 2017; Goldberg, 2018) Despite a subsequent normalization of ties with Iran in 2023, just prior to the war it seemed plausible that MBS continued to press for U.S. military action against Iran from behind the scenes, as suggested by reporting at the time (Birnbbaum et al., 2026).

Saudi foreign policy under MBS also appeared to support claims in IR research that the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of a single ruler—"personalization"—tends to lead to more confrontational foreign policy decisions



(Richter, 2020; Weeks, 2012, 2014). As Defense Minister, before entering the line of succession, MBS successfully lobbied his father to back a Saudi-led military intervention into neighboring Yemen's civil war—aimed at countering the Iran-linked Houthi movement. In addition to the high stakes confrontation in Yemen, after deposing his main rival Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in 2017, MBS joined an Emirati-led effort to blockade and pressure neighboring Qatar over disagreements about backing for Islamist movements. That year, he also kidnapped the Prime Minister of Lebanon in a convoluted and ultimately failed attempt to curb Iranian influence over Lebanese politics.¹

Despite a clear willingness to engage in risky, high-stakes policies internationally, an emphasis on regime type alone cannot explain MBS' apparent return to a more "moderate" Saudi foreign policy towards Iran (and other actors).² First, while the concentration of power is of course consequential, rulers are often compelled to adjust their strategy based on lessons learned from previous policy successes and failures. Second, even authoritarian rulers with considerable personal power cannot simply wish away domestic political constraints, which include the policy expectations of key domestic constituencies. Both of these factors help explain why Saudi Arabia under MBS has returned to a foreign policy that seeks to avoid direct conflict with Iran.

A New Paradigm of Power

Even if personalization concentrates decision-making

¹ See Hubbard (2020, pp. 86–89, 137–146, 175–185).

² I use the term "moderate" to simply mean a preference for non-military means of pursuing foreign-policy goals. For appropriate caveats about Saudi foreign policy, see the appendix to Leber (2024).

...[E]ven authoritarian rulers with considerable personal power cannot simply wish away domestic political constraints, which include the policy expectations of key domestic constituencies

in the hands of one individual, foreign-policy choices come down to how that individual and their advisors perceive their interests—chiefly staying in power (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2004), or avoiding the kind of economic or security disaster that makes staying in power more difficult (Aksoy et al. 2015). In forthcoming work focused on domestic politics, I analyze how policy "paradigms" akin to those studied in democratic contexts (i.e. P. A. Hall, 1993) also inform how authoritarian rulers evaluate policy decisions. While I am skeptical of models of authoritarian learning that imply rulers steadily update their view of the world in line with readily observ-

able "lessons" (S. G. F. Hall & Ambrosio, 2017; Heydemann, 2024), aspects of rulers' worldviews—such as the efficacy of military coercion or the reliability of allies—can shift under the weight of political developments that discredit status-quo policy paradigms.

The assertiveness of MBS' early years in power reflected more than the mechanical effects of personalization. The prince rose to power with a clear set of ideas for how to manage Saudi Arabia's foreign relations—cranking up the rhetoric of the monarchy's "cold war" with Iran while counting on a strong security relationship with the United States to ultimately contain Iran. Even before the fallout from the Arab Spring brought Saudi-Iranian tensions to new heights, U.S. officials complained privately that Saudi counterparts wanted to "fight the Iranians to the last American"—frustrated by Iranian activity but relying on the United States to take action (Lynch, 2010). MBS initially sought to take overt Saudi action against perceived Iranian encroachments while also aligning closely with a new Trump administration that (the Crown Prince hoped) would constrain Iran through military and economic co-



ercion (Yom, 2017).

Between 2017 and 2026, however, those ideas about Saudi security were repeatedly discredited by regional developments and U.S. policy choices. For one, the kind of easy victory implied by titling a Saudi-led military operation “Decisive Storm” proved elusive in Yemen, with military conflict settling into a bruising quagmire and civilian devastation rapidly becoming one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters. Mounting U.S. outrage over the war was turbocharged by Saudi agents’ high-profile assassination of prominent critic Jamal Khashoggi, resulting in even the Trump administration putting pressure on MBS to wind down involvement in the war (Stark, 2024, pp. 139–168). By 2019, in unaired segments in an interview with CBS’ 60 Minutes, the Crown Prince conceded that he had learned from five years of war “That war must be a last resort” (“CBS, MBS and Un-Aired Excerpts,” 2019).

Despite a more aggressive posture via Iranian proxies, Saudi Arabia learned that U.S. support had its limits. Even as the Trump administration cranked up its “Maximum Pressure” campaign against Iran, it proved unwilling to do much about direct attacks by Iran-aligned proxies on Saudi oil facilities, and unable to shield the Kingdom from drone and missile attacks by Houthi forces in Yemen (Brands et al., 2019). By early 2023, with the subsequent Biden administration neither able to strike a renewed nuclear deal with Iran nor interested in a costly military confrontation, MBS and key advisors (like National Security Adviser Musaed Al-Aiban) concluded that a modest accommodation with Iran was the safest way forward. These twin *détentes* (with Iran and the Houthis) were stress-tested by the October 7th attacks and Israel’s military response in Gaza, Lebanon, and elsewhere—confirming MBS’ sense that Saudi Arabia could largely exempt itself from these conflicts.

Finally, the course of the current war itself has under-

cut any sense that even the United States can secure a swift and decisive military victory against Iran. Rhetoric by MBS and his advisors headed into the war still left the door open to co-signing a U.S.-led victory over Iran, ambiguously encouraging the Trump administration to “finish the job” by either military or diplomatic means. However, Saudi Arabia avoided overt retaliation to subsequent Iranian attacks on Saudi soil, calculating that joining the Trump administration would both expose Saudi Arabia to reputational risk (associating it with Israeli attacks in Lebanon) and to further attacks from Iran (which concentrated most of its attacks on the UAE). Despite reports of a few targeted Saudi reprisals against Iranian strikes, Saudi Arabia held off on any attacks while working to build support for a ceasefire.

Other Domestic Priorities

Still, if the hard lessons of the failed intervention in Yemen shaped Saudi policy towards Iran, why did its policy differ so much from its neighbors especially the United Arab Emirates during the initial phase of the Iran War? Ideas and learning by individual leaders are inevitably shaped by domestic politics. For Saudi Arabia, domestic constraints include a sizeable citizen population with strong expectations of state-provided (or facilitated) employment, the apparent exhaustion of the latest drive for economic diversification, and the immense size of Saudi Arabia itself which afforded “strategic depth” with which to buy time from responding to Iranian attacks.

First, the relationship between labor markets, “free resources” and policy choices has been a mainstay of comparative research on the Middle East and North Africa as well as the Gulf specifically. In one influential typology, Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan distinguish the resource-abundant, labor-poor populations of the GCC—and their attendant non-citizen workforces—from more (citizen) labor-abundant states in the region

(Cammett et al., 2015, pp. 25–26). Michael Herb (2014) further distinguishes “super-rentier” states like the UAE, where budgets can cover well-paid public-sector jobs for almost all citizens, from “middling” rentiers like Saudi Arabia where private-sector job creation (and so-called “Saudization” of existing jobs) is essential to absorbing citizen job seekers.

Providing jobs is in turn a key indicator of the Saudi monarchy’s policy performance, transforming it into a political imperative for successive Saudi rulers (Leber & Draege, 2026). While MBS and his predecessors have certainly relied on threats, arrests, and even executions to stifle dissent, GCC monarchs generally combine targeted repression with generous policy provision rather than trying to rule through fear alone.

Second, the political imperative to provide desirable jobs for Saudi citizens has increasingly influenced Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy as an ambitious economic-development program has gradually lost steam. In April of 2016, MBS boasted that the slate of “Vision 2030” socio-economic reforms he championed would create a higher standard of living while diversifying the Saudi economy away from oil: “I think in 2020, we can live without oil.” (Al-Arabiya, 2016) While subsequent policy reforms certainly wrought changes in Saudi Arabia too numerous to list here, the Saudi economy remains closely tied to global oil markets while various economic schemes have not served as a “silver bullet” for providing Saudis with jobs (Leber, 2025). A forever war in the Gulf would choke off any hope of foreign investment in the Saudi economy or the greater connectivity essential for expanding the job market.

Vision 2030 has encouraged much greater emphasis on nationalism rather than orthodox Sunni Islam as a basis of collective Saudi identity...this has had the side effect of reducing the salience of Sunni-Shi’a divisions

For example, the unemployment rate for Saudi women has dropped from over 30% in 2017 to under 15% in recent years, even as women’s labor-force participation has increased. Yet while the male unemployment rate decreased (from over 7% to under 5%), it has recently begun to creep back upward—closing out 2025 at its highest level since mid-2021. There has also been an uptick in grumbling about foreigners “taking” Saudis’ jobs, typically an outlet for frustration about the quality of jobs available to Saudis. This in turn reflects that Saudi unemployment may have fallen, yet still remains starkly different from the citizen experience in neigh-

boring super-rentiers. In far-wealthier (in per-capita terms) Qatar, for example, the citizen unemployment rate is a mere 0.2% for men and 0.8% for women as of Q4 2025. In Qatar every citizen who wants a job has a job (and probably a good one at that). Despite its enormous oil wealth, because there are almost 19 million Saudi citizens, such a policy is impossible to implement in Saudi Arabia.

Simultaneously, social changes associated with Vision 2030 seem to have mitigated a domestic factor that pushed past Saudi rulers to fear Irani-

an influence. In an influential study, Gause (Gause III, 2009) explained Gulf-state alignment against Iran as a product of rulers’ fears of sectarian minorities (Shi’a citizens) threatening regime stability as a result of ideological appeals by Iran. Vision 2030 has encouraged much greater emphasis on nationalism rather than orthodox Sunni Islam as a basis of collective Saudi identity; while not without its own problems, this has had the side effect of reducing the salience of Sunni-Shi’a divisions that once dominated the monarchy’s strategy of rule (Al-Rasheed, 2011).



Finally, both physical geography and pre-existing infrastructure bought time for Saudi Arabia amid the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, preventing the crisis from becoming existential for Saudi Arabia and forcing a risky gamble on expanding the conflict. Saudi Arabia is a large country, and the only state with coastlines in both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. While attacks by Houthi forces had caused their own difficulties for Saudi supply and logistics, Jeddah and other Red Sea ports provided an alternative entrypoint for much-needed foreign goods even as a long-standing East-West pipeline permitted the Kingdom to continue exporting crude oil through the Bab el-Mandeb. The increase in oil prices was such that aggregate Saudi oil revenues remained largely unchanged despite the war, notwithstanding the costs of damaged infrastructure and opportunity costs of foregone investments.

All of these factors point to the important roles of domestic politics in shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign-policy choices amid the Iran War.

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The Iran War

SOVEREIGNTY, SURVIVAL, AND SUCCESSION: THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF THE 2026 WAR ON IRAN

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The domestic politics of the 2026 War on Iran must be situated within a long history in which imperial military aggression, struggles over sovereignty, authoritarian consolidation, and popular mobilization have repeatedly shaped one another. Since the early nineteenth century, wars and interventions by Russia, Britain, and later the United States have shaped Iranian state formation, elite conflict, opposition politics, and the language of freedom, independence, and political order.¹

The Tobacco Protest of 1891–92, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, the oil nationalization movement of 1951–53, and the 1979 revolution were all mass mobilizations against imperial intervention and for Iranian sovereignty. The 1953 coup marked a decisive turning point. By overthrowing Mohammad Mosaddegh's government, the United States and Britain transformed anti-imperialism in Iran into a more

¹ Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "Removal Without Rotation: Supreme Authority, Foreign Intervention, and Political Reproduction in Modern Iran," *Popular Politics*, Unbound, March 2, 2026; and Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "The Factory Was Always the Target," *Popular Politics*, Unbound, March 28, 2026.

specifically anti-American political language.² Khomeini's opposition to the Shah, which first emerged publicly in 1963 in response to the White Revolution and Iran's deepening alignment with the United States and Israel, developed within this historical field.

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After 1979, anti-imperialism became institutionalized in the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policy. Successive governments expressed a desire for sovereignty and staunchly resisted foreign interventions. Anti-imperialism also became a language through which the state suppressed dissent and disciplined opposition by frequently framing its critics as agents of foreign power. Anti-imperialism therefore occupied a dual position in Iran's domestic politics: rooted in a genuine experience of foreign domination but also incorporated into the authoritarian

practices of the postrevolutionary state. This tension became a recurring axis of factional struggle within Iran, dividing actors who sought international accommodation from those who defined political

² Amanat, Abbas. 2017. *Iran: A Modern History*. Yale University Press.



legitimacy through resistance to the United States and its regional order.

The domestic lead-up to the current war was shaped by American sanctions, economic deterioration, political exclusion, and repression. Since December 2017, Iran had experienced a series of anti-regime uprisings that exposed deep crises of legitimacy. Economic grievances increasingly escalated into political demands, as inflation, currency collapse, unemployment, sanctions, and mismanagement came to be understood as symptoms of a broader political order. The uprisings of 2017–18, 2019, 2022, and January 2026 differed in their triggers, social geography, and forms of participation, but they shared a common anti-regime orientation.

The January 2026 uprising and massacre brought this pattern to its most violent point. The escalation unfolded after the Twelve-Day War, as President Trump was directly threatening military action against Iran and parts of the opposition were framing external force as a path to liberation. This domestic context matters: states respond to protest according to the threat they perceive,³ and threat perception is shaped by the scale of mobilization, its anti-regime character, the degree of confrontation, and the wider geopolitical environment. In January 2026, these factors converged. The Islamic Republic's perception of existential threat magnified its repressive response, deepened social trauma, and intensified the sense that domestic paths to political change had been exhausted.⁴

This was the moment in which the politics of foreign-backed regime change gained greater force. Years of exclusion, repression, and failed openings had created an opportunity for the United States, Israel, and parts of the diaspora opposition to present war as a political "solution." The language of liber-

ation by external force drew its power from genuine despair, but transformed that despair into a strategic illusion.⁵ This illusion also shaped the calculations of the attacking states, Israel and the US. The recurrence of anti-regime uprisings, the brutality of the January crackdown, and the visibility of opposition anger contributed to a perception that the Islamic Republic was more vulnerable than its institutional and coercive structures suggested. The regime was deeply unpopular and politically wounded, but it retained coercive institutions, mechanisms of elite replacement, a mobilizable loyalist base, and state infrastructure capable of operating under crisis.⁶

The war placed the Islamic Republic under the most serious existential threat it had faced since its founding. The assassination of senior military and political leaders, including the killing of Ali Khamenei as head of state, represented a profound rupture in the regime's leadership structure. Yet the regime's response drew on experiences developed over decades. The Islamic Republic was born amid revolutionary violence, internal conflict, and war. In its early years, leading officials, including a president, were assassinated. Khamenei himself had survived an assassination attempt before becoming supreme leader. These experiences shaped a system accustomed to replacing fallen officials and converting death into a language of martyrdom and resilience.

The killing of Khamenei marked the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic that foreign military force had eliminated the country's head of state. Yet despite the unprecedented nature of this setback, the institutional response followed familiar patterns. The state moved quickly to replace its fallen officials and preserve continuity. The military response relied on forms of adaptation Iran had developed in anticipation of war with a superior military power. Decentralized command structures, missile capabilities, horizontal esca-

3 Earl, Jennifer, and Jessica Maves Braithwaite. 2022. "Layers of Political Repression: Integrating Research on Social Movement Repression." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* (Volume 18, 2022): 227–48.

4 See Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "After the Massacre: Rethinking Strategy in Iran's Uprising," *Popular Politics, Unbound*, January 25, 2026; and Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "Rethinking Political Change in Iran from Protest to War," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, June 3, 2026.

5 See Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "The Fantasy of Liberation by War," *Popular Politics, Unbound*, March 4, 2026.

6 See Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (Princeton University Press, 2022).



lation, and pressure through the Strait of Hormuz allowed Iran to avoid a purely symmetrical confrontation that would have favored its adversaries. Iran's asymmetric response reinforced the standing of the Revolutionary Guards and other security institutions as defenders of sovereignty, while narrowing the political field around emphasizing wartime discipline and loyalty.

State-led mobilization formed the domestic counterpart to military response. Loyalist crowds filled public spaces, mourning Khamenei, supporting retaliation, and demonstrating that the streets were not empty terrain awaiting opposition takeover. This mobilization rested on dense organizational infrastructure: mosques, Basij networks—the volunteer paramilitary arm of the Revolutionary Guards—universities, state bureaucracies, war commemoration institutions, and the memory of the Iran-Iraq War. The Islamic Republic has retained a large and organized loyalist base. Loyalists are not a majority, but are institutionally embedded, ideologically committed, and repeatedly demonstrated an ability to engage in public mobilization.

The succession of Mojtaba Khamenei added a further layer to the war's domestic consequences.⁷ Khamenei's elevation drew on the constitutional procedures of the Islamic Republic, but its political foundations were formed under emergency conditions. Mojtaba acquired wartime legitimacy as the son of a leader killed in an imperial military assault. Martyrdom politics, long cultivated by his father through institutions of war commemoration, now worked to elevate him. In 1989 Ali Khamenei entered the leadership with revolutionary credentials, a record as president, wartime experience, and longstanding ties to the political elite. Unlike his father, Mojtaba never held major public office, a visible revolutionary career, or an independent public persona.

Mojtaba's thinner professional credentials and deeper dependence on the Revolutionary Guards and loyalist clerical-security networks make the current period more

complex than consolidation around his father in 1989. Mojtaba has to rule alongside political elites with longer records, broader constituencies, and deeper experience in statecraft. His position resembles the early years of Ali Khamenei's leadership, when Khamenei initially governed in alliance with figures such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani before accumulating institutional power and sidelining older allies. His lack of political record also invites comparison with Mohammad Reza Shah in 1941, who came to the throne as a young, inexperienced leader highly dependent on more established elites. However, unlike Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran in 1941 was under foreign occupation, whereas the Islamic Republic in 2026 has survived an imperial military assault and emerged claiming strategic endurance.

The ceasefire, negotiations, and memorandum of understanding between Iran and the United States therefore mark a potentially significant moment in Iran's modern political history. Since the nineteenth century, major confrontations with imperial powers have often ended in territorial loss, occupation, externally imposed leadership change, or political defeat. In 2026, the Iranian state endured a concerted assault, preserved its institutional continuity, and entered high-stakes negotiations that could produce the release of frozen assets, partial sanctions relief, and the possibility of broader sanctions relief through further talks. These gains remain fragile and could be reversed if the memorandum collapses. But even as a provisional outcome, they matter because they allow the state to frame the war as survival with strategic benefit rather than defeat.

The economic implications of this possible break with the past are crucial. Years of sanctions had produced deep social exhaustion, impoverishment, and institutional decay, and the war intensified these pressures. Sanctions relief and access to frozen assets could expand resources for reconstruction, employment, public services, and social recovery. Economic stabilization would also affect civil society. Social movements, unions, professional associations, feminist networks, student groups, and cultural actors all operate under

⁷ Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "From Rupture to Dynasty: War and Hereditary Succession in Iran," *Popular Politics*, Unbound, March 9, 2026.



huge material constraints. A partial economic opening may allow parts of civil society to recuperate.

The war also produced a strategic defeat for regime-change projects backed by Israel and the United States. The promise that external military force could deliver liberation was tested in practice and produced mass destruction, wartime repression, loyalist mobilization, military empowerment, and dynastic succession within the Islamic Republic. This experience is already reshaping debates among Iranian activists and opposition currents. The January massacre had strengthened the claim that all domestic paths had been exhausted. The war has now shown the destructive consequences of transferring political agency from Iranian society to foreign military power. This does not resolve the strategic dilemmas facing Iranian civil society, but it changes the terrain on which those dilemmas are debated.⁸

The postwar order is likely to give military and security institutions greater political leverage. Their wartime performance has strengthened their standing, and the experience of direct imperial military aggression will understandably make national defense a more urgent concern for many Iranians, including critics of the Islamic Republic. Comparative cases such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Türkiye suggest that militaries that take on the nationalist mandate in moments of existential confrontation can gain political prominence and public credibility for a long time.⁹ In Iran, however, this will unfold within a still-factional political system rather than a fully military-dominated order. The cessation of hostilities, the beginning of negotiations,

sanctions relief, and the demands of reconstruction may also strengthen actors associated with diplomatic management, economic recovery, and social stabilization. President Masoud Pezeshkian and the Supreme National Security Council have already gained greater visibility in this setting. Mojtaba Khamenei's dependence on the Revolutionary Guards may reinforce the leverage of security institutions, but postwar governance will still require clerical, bureaucratic, technocratic, and electoral actors whose authority coercive institutions alone cannot replace.

The future of Iranian politics will depend on whether social forces can use any postwar opening to rebuild independent capacity, and how the state's survival under assault reshapes the balance among repression, factional competition, controlled accommodation, and renewed forms of public mobilization

Civil society's prospects will depend on how these forces interact. The regime may interpret survival as a reason for intensified repression, especially toward actors it associates with foreign-backed destabilization. But it may also conclude that limited social and political openings are necessary to rebuild legitimacy, manage economic recovery, and reduce the appeal of external regime-change projects. The Islamic Republic has historically oscillated between closure and controlled opening, with concessions that partially respond to social pressure while leaving the broader struggle over political authority unresolved.

The postwar period may reproduce that pattern under new conditions: strengthened military institutions operating within a still-factional political system, alongside selective openings designed to stabilize society after war.

The 2026 Iran War will shape domestic politics well beyond the battlefield. It has intensified older questions of sovereignty, anti-imperialism, authoritarian rule, popular protest, elite succession, and civil society strategy. It has strengthened military institutions while exposing the weakness of the new supreme leader's political biography. It has discredited

⁸ See Kadivar, "Rethinking Political Change in Iran from Protest to War."

⁹ See Slater, Dan. 2010. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.



the fantasy of liberation by imperial war while leaving unresolved the crisis of representation and repression that made that fantasy appealing to some in the first place. The future of Iranian politics will depend on whether social forces can use any postwar opening to rebuild independent capacity, and how the state's survival under assault reshapes the balance among repression, factional competition, controlled accommodation, and renewed forms of public mobilization.





The Iran War

LOSING HEARTS, MINDS, AND LEGITIMACY: ARAB PUBLIC OPINION AFTER THE GAZA AND IRAN WARS

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Practically every person in the Middle East has been affected by the chain of events set in motion by Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel. Tens of thousands of people, mostly Gazans, have been killed, millions have been displaced, and billions of dollars in damage have been inflicted.

It's not surprising, then, that the perspective of tens of millions of people has shifted.

Polling by Arab Barometer, a survey project that we co-lead with others, conducted in the months after October 7, showed a sea change in public opinion. As ordinary people in the region witnessed Israel's devastating war in Gaza, they turned sharply against Israel and the country's biggest ally, the United States. Surveys we conducted in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Tunisia from August to November 2025—before the latest round of fighting with Iran—make clear that the changes observed in the aftermath of October 7 have stuck. People in the region have lost nearly all confidence in a U.S.-led regional order. Instead, on the whole, they now regard

China, Iran, and Russia more favorably than the United States and, often, Europe. More than ever, Washington and many of its key allies are seen as one-sided, morally compromised, and selectively committed to international law compared with this axis of autocracies. When asked which country protects freedoms, contributes

to regional security, and supports the Palestinian cause, respondents chose China, Iran, and Russia more often than the United States or some of its partners.

That does not mean Arab publics uniformly support the policies of Beijing, Tehran, or Moscow. Arab publics, for example, still see

Iran's regional influence and nuclear program as threatening. The region's center of political trust is shifting not because China, Iran, or Russia have built a universally attractive model. Instead, it has shifted because the standing of the United States, and to some extent Europe, has plummeted.

The war with Iran is unlikely to help these perceptions. The conflict, after all, was started by the United States and Israel. As part of it, Israel has renewed its assault in Lebanon, and coun-

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tries in the Persian Gulf have been battered by missiles and drones. Since the war started, little progress has been made toward rebuilding Gaza. If anything, Arab publics might be angrier at the United States than they were when we polled them in the fall of 2025.

The United States' reputation tanked when the war in Gaza began, and it has not improved in the time since. In fact, Washington is less popular than it has been in years. In most countries surveyed, few people look upon U.S. President Donald Trump's foreign policies favorably—just 24 percent in Iraq, 21 percent in Lebanon, 14 percent in Tunisia, and 12 percent in Jordan and the Palestinian territories. Only in Morocco and Syria did a substantial number of respondents—63 percent and 61 percent, respectively—appear to approve of what Trump is doing in the region, and that is probably because Trump recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara (a disputed territory) and has supported Syria's new government, which came to power by overthrowing a bloody and unpopular dictator.

Trump, of course, did help put an end to the war in Gaza by negotiating the October cease-fire. Still, his administration is less liked than that of his predecessor. Under Trump's leadership, most of the Middle East has been under missile attack. It's not surprising that 66 percent of respondents in Egypt, 59 percent in Jordan, 53 percent in the Palestinian territories, 51 percent in Iraq and Tunisia, and 47 percent in Lebanon think that Trump's foreign policies toward the Arab region are worse than Biden's—and the Biden administration polled poorly.

By contrast, China's favorability in 2025 stands much higher overall, ranging from 37 percent in Syria to 69 percent in Tunisia. Russia, though less popular than China, still outperforms the United States and its allies in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Tunisia. Iran's favorability is lower and more uneven. It is highest in Tunisia, at 55 percent, and lowest in Syria,

at 5 percent—where Iran long supported the brutal rule of former President Bashar al-Assad. But in general, Iran is on the upswing. In the last five years, it has increased its level of support in Iraq by 20 points and in the Palestinian territories by 12 points. Its favorability numbers have overtaken the United States in a majority of the countries we surveyed.

Perhaps the most striking result, however, is the surge in support for the foreign policies of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who was killed by U.S.-Israeli strikes in February. For years, Tehran has funded destabilizing proxies in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen and unsettled the region with its nuclear program. As a result, his international policies typically polled very poorly. But in our most recent survey, Khamenei's foreign policy was seen as favorable by a sizable share of respondents: 49 percent in Tunisia and 48 percent in Iraq. In the Palestinian territories, Morocco, and Lebanon, 36 percent, 35 percent, and 29 percent had positive views of Khamenei's approach. Only in Jordan and Syria was Khamenei very unpopular.

That does not mean people across the Arab world are blind to the challenges Iran presents. Large majorities in several countries still describe the country's nuclear program as a critical threat, ranging from 55 percent in the Palestinian territories to 85 percent in Syria. Iran's political influence in the region is also widely viewed as a major issue, including by majorities in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. But bigger majorities in those same countries judge Israel's ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories as a critical threat to their national security. Iran is thus redeemed, in large part, by its opposition to Israel and commitment to the Palestinian cause.

The United States, in contrast, is disliked for its role in the conflict. Arab publics overwhelmingly see it as siding with Israel over the Palestinians, including by 86



percent of respondents in Egypt and Jordan, 84 percent in the Palestinian territories, 78 percent in Lebanon, 71 percent in Syria, 69 percent in Tunisia, and 58 percent in Iraq. The European Union is not perceived as quite so supportive of Israel, but Arab publics still largely believe it sides with Israel. Arab views of specific European countries, however, are more varied. Germany, for example, is perceived to be more committed to defending Israel than the Palestinians by wide margins in Jordan (35 percent versus 16 percent, respectively), Lebanon (45 percent versus 12 percent), the Palestinian territories (43 percent versus 11 percent), and Syria (36 percent versus 17 percent).

People in the Arab world widely believe the United Nations is biased in favor of Israel, too. Only 11 percent of respondents in the Palestinian territories and Egypt, 14 percent in Tunisia and Jordan, 17 percent in Syria, 20 percent in Iraq and Morocco, and 25 percent in Lebanon say the UN is more committed to defending the Palestinians than Israel. By contrast, about 40 to 50 percent of respondents throughout the region say the UN is more committed to defending Israel. The message is plain: for many Arab citizens, the problem is no longer just U.S. double standards. It is the bankruptcy of the entire international legal and humanitarian system.

Not surprisingly, the least popular country among Arab publics is Israel itself. In all the states we surveyed, at most 5 percent have a very or somewhat favorable view of Israel except in Morocco, where 13 percent of people do. Arab publics are not immovable in their views on Israel. Consider, for example, attitudes toward establishing formal relations with Israel. Right now, in no country does more than a quarter of people across the region say they support their government normalizing ties with

Israel. (In Egypt and Jordan, for instance, just 4 percent of people do.) But when asked whether they would support normalization if Israel recognized a Palestinian state, support jumps by 27 points in Syria, 26 points in the Palestinian territories, 23 points in Jordan, 19 points in Iraq, 18 points in Morocco, and 17 points in Lebanon. Meanwhile, support for the Arab plan to rebuild Gaza, which was first proposed in March 2025, is overwhelming.

A majority of respondents in all countries (except Morocco) say that the two-state solution is the best way to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including 67 percent in Jordan, 64 percent in Egypt and Syria, 60 percent in Iraq, 59 percent in the Palestinian territories, and 51 percent in Lebanon. Yet

in the past few years, Israel has practically extinguished any chance that a two-state solution could work, allowing settlements in the West Bank to expand to the point where the territory is virtually non-contiguous. In a sense, then, Arab anger at Washington and its allies reflects a call for Israel's friends to hold Israel to account for its transgressions—and an expression of deep frustration at their failure to do so.

But dim views of the United States also go beyond Washington's position on Palestinian issues. Perhaps the most damning finding for the United States is its loss of legitimacy on the international stage. When asked which countries uphold international law to a great or medium extent, respondents were much more likely to choose China than the United States. For example, in Egypt—one of Washington's major non-NATO allies—just 25 percent of people say they believe the United States upholds international law, compared with 58 percent who say so for China. To an extent, this might also be driven by concerns about Palestinians; large shares of Arab publics, ranging from 26 percent in Morocco to 44

...[T]he United States and Europe are not just losing hearts and minds. They are losing the perception that they protect human rights at all



percent in Lebanon, believe that China is more committed to defending Palestinian rights than Israeli rights. In most Arab countries, respondents also say the European Union is less committed to upholding international law than is China and roughly on par with Russia.

The warning in Arab Barometer's latest data is clear: the United States and Europe are not just losing hearts and minds. They are losing the perception that they protect human rights at all. Over the last few years, most Arab publics have come to believe more than ever that the United States and Europe have failed Palestinians, failed to enforce international law, and failed to uphold a fair, rules-based order. The war with Iran will likely hurt the reputation of the United States and Israel even more.

Arab governments might then start to pivot their relations accordingly. Arab officials, for instance, may want to do more business with China and Russia, establish stronger defense partnerships with the two countries, or join the multilateral groups they lead. In fact, Arab governments are already starting to break with the United States or try to hide some of their dealings with Washington. In the lead-up to the war with Iran, leaders in the Gulf warned their U.S. counterparts not to launch another assault. Yet the United States did not heed their pleas and dismissed their concerns, even while they would be the primary targets of Iranian strikes. As Gulf countries have suffered massive damage as a result of the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran, some leaders have considered withdrawing their financial investments from American institutions.

Whether Washington's approval continues to decline, plateaus, or rebounds therefore depends on American officials. How they end the war with Iran, how they handle Gaza, and whether they can find a peaceful resolution to the broader Palestinian-Israeli conflict will be important in the years ahead. To rehabilitate its image, in other words, the United States must match its deeds

to the principles it once professed to hold: a commitment to international law and support for human rights, democracy, and a rules-based order. It must apply such principles not just when doing so serves its interests—as in Ukraine—but equally across the globe.





The Iran War

LEBANESE DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE 2026 IRAN WAR

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The 2026 war between the United States and Iran has unfolded alongside another distinct yet closely entangled conflict in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah, an armed non-state actor supported by Iran that has also been a key governing actor in Lebanon since the end of the country's civil war in 1990. Since the war began in Lebanon on March 2, an estimated 3,798 people have been killed and another 11,781 injured. At the height of the conflict, over 1 million citizens were displaced, with an estimated 131,200 remaining in shelters and others still relocated elsewhere.¹ The conflict has also resulted in the demolition of entire villages in southern Lebanon and the occupation by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) of roughly 5 percent of Lebanese territory, stretching ten kilometers into the country.² This destruction has generated an estimated USD 365 million in damages in Beirut

and Mount Lebanon alone.³ Israel's stated military objective is the disarmament of Hezbollah and the establishment of a "security zone" to prevent attacks by Hezbollah along Israel's northern border.⁴

The 2026 war constitutes an extension and escalation of the conflict that has been ongoing in Lebanon since October 2023 and expanded in September-November 2024.⁵ Following the 2024 war, the Lebanese government agreed to a plan, sponsored by the US and France and supported by Israel, that entailed the phased disarmament of Hezbollah by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in exchange for a withdrawal of Israeli forces.⁶ Renewed efforts in this vein following the 2026 war culminated in a Trilateral Framework Agreement with a similar focus.⁷

¹ These numbers are recorded by the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health as of June 15, 2026. They do not distinguish between civilians and combatants. For more detail, see "Lebanon Flash Update #35: Escalation of Hostilities in Lebanon" (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2026).

² For a description of destruction in Southern Lebanon, see William Christou et al., "Everything is Gone: Israel Destroys Entire Villages in Lebanon" (*The Guardian*, April 12, 2026). For a discussion of the occupation scope, see Hugo Bachega, "Hezbollah Support Endures in South Lebanon as Ceasefire Fails to Stop War with Israel" (*BBC*, 14 May 2026).

³ "Rapid Damage Assessment" (United Nations Development Program, June 8, 2026).

⁴ Luc Bronner and Hélène Sallon, "What is Israel's Military Objective in Lebanon?" (*Le Monde*, April 4, 2026).

⁵ Hezbollah fired rockets into northern Israel the day after the October 7 attacks "in solidarity" with the Palestinian cause, in the words of senior party officials. "Israel, Hezbollah Exchange Artillery, Rocket Fire" (*Reuters*, October 8, 2023).

⁶ "Announcement of a Cessation of Hostilities and Related Commitments on Enhanced Security Arrangements and Towards the Implementation of UNSCR 1701." (*PA-X Peace Agreements Database*, November 27, 2024).

⁷ For a summary of the agreement, see "Landmark Israel-Lebanon Agreement Intersects the US-Iran Conflict" (The Soufan Center, July 1, 2026).



This exchange—disarmament for IDF withdrawal—has remained unfulfilled on both sides and, as such, has left negotiations to end the conflict at an impasse. In turn, this deadlock has bled into the US-Iran negotiations, with Iran tying its cooperation to the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon prior to (and, presumably, without) Hezbollah's disarmament.⁸

This impasse notwithstanding, the 2026 war has led to important shifts in Lebanese domestic politics, both in terms of elite behavior and mass public opinion. As I detail below, segments of both elites and the public increasingly align with a political stance that rejects Hezbollah's presence in the country as an armed actor. Yet Hezbollah as a military force, governing party, and clientelist service provider still retains enough power to preclude decisive moves toward disarmament. At the state level, elites within the Lebanese government and the LAF remain hesitant to employ the army in active confrontation against Hezbollah. Conversely, at the mass level, the party's historical legacy and continuing interventions in governance and service provision continue to legitimate it among many Shia Lebanese, even as it loses popularity among other ethnosectarian groups. The result, absent any diplomatic breakthrough, is—and seemingly will continue to be—a stalemate continually punctuated by catastrophic violence.

On the elite end, the Lebanese government's shift against Hezbollah's armed activities has intensified over successive rounds of conflict. Less than a day after Hezbollah fired rockets in support of Iran in March 2026, Prime Minister Nawaf Salam announced a total ban on Hezbollah's military and security operations, including

8 William Christou and Jonathan Yerushalmy, "US-Iran Talks Abruptly Called Off After Israel and Hezbollah Trade Deadly Attacks" (*The Guardian*, June 19, 2026).

...[A]vailable data indicate that Lebanese public opinion has largely shifted against Hezbollah's presence as an armed actor

those against Israel, and explicitly declared Hezbollah's armed presence to be illegal.⁹ The government's declaration overturned a longstanding "security formula" in which the Lebanese state granted Hezbollah an exceptional right to act as an armed actor alongside the army and security services.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, the Lebanese government (via its ambassador to the US and other representatives) entered into direct negotiations with Israel, the first such talks between the states since 1993.¹¹ Within Parliament, previously anti-Hezbollah elites have deepened their stance, while some prominent former allies—such as the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, MP Osama Saad, and MP Faisal Karame—have distanced themselves from the party, calling for its disarmament.¹²

Despite deepening support for disarmament at the state elite level, several constraints still limit the government's capacity and willingness to act. First, important disagreements persist within the government—between pro- and anti-Hezbollah factions—and between the government and the LAF on exactly how and with what intensity to pursue disarmament. Specifically, some disagree over what level of confrontation with Hezbollah would be acceptable or feasible. Army commander Rodolphe Haykal, in partic-

9 "Lebanese PM Bans Hezbollah's Military Activities After Attack on Israel" (*Al Jazeera*, March 2, 2026).

10 For a background on this formula, see Lina Khatib, "How Hezbollah Holds Sway Over the Lebanese State" (Chatham House, 2021). For an example of the Lebanese government's adherence to the army-people-resistance equation, see Joseph Kechichian, "Hariri Cabinet Capitulates to Hezbollah Demand" (*Gulf News*, September 16, 2018).

11 Mohammad Mansour, "Israel-Lebanon Direct Talks in the US: All to Know" (*Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2026).

12 For discussion of the FPM, see "In Exchange for Hezbollah Disarming, Israel Must Withdraw," Bassil Says at Baabda Palace" (*L'Orient Today*, July 4, 2025). For Saad, see Yara Abi Akil, "Osama Saad Takes Another Step Toward Breaking with Hezbollah" (*L'Orient Today*, September 18, 2025). For Karame, see Majid Abu Mujahid, "Karame Strengthens the 'Political Offensive'" (*Al Nahar*, June 10, 2026).



ular, has publicly pushed back against action that would put the army in active confrontation with Hezbollah, suggesting that this could lead to internal splits within the military (perhaps via Shia Muslim defection) and societal unrest.¹³ The prime minister and observers, in turn, have suggested that this failure to adhere to the government's disarmament directive risks undermining the credibility of both institutions.¹⁴ While opinions vary on the technical and military capacity of the LAF to disarm Hezbollah, even if it were to be more confrontational in its approach, this likely could not be completed without increased international military and diplomatic support.¹⁵ Since the 2026 conflict and the expansion of Israel's occupation, a stalemate over renewed disarmament efforts has coalesced: Israel conditions withdrawal of occupying forces on disarmament, while the Lebanese state conditions disarmament on withdrawal.¹⁶

Shifting to the mass level, available data indicate that Lebanese public opinion has largely shifted against Hezbollah's presence as an armed actor. Opinion polling in the contemporary Lebanese context is difficult: mass displacement, a fast-changing conflict context, and the sensitivity of topics related to Israel and Hezbollah all mean that data should be interpreted conservatively and methodologies scrutinized. That said, most recent survey work indicates a shift outside of Hezbollah's ethno-sectarian base against the party's armed activities. A nationally representative panel survey conducted by Information International in August 2025, and again in late April-early May 2026, found that support for a peace agreement with Israel rose from 25% to 49% overall, and that a clear majority of all religious sects other than Shia Muslims supported Hezbollah's disarmament (includ-

ing 87% of Maronite Christians, 77% of Druze, and 70% of Sunni Muslims). In stark contrast, only 13% of Shia Muslims supported disarmament.¹⁷ These trends suggest that Hezbollah's weapons, now more than ever, have become not just a core political division in Lebanon, but also one with a distinctly sectarianized dimension.

Hezbollah's support among its co-sectarian base persists for a variety of reasons. A rich literature captures the embeddedness of the party's ideological and mobilizational project within Lebanese society, particularly in Shia-majority areas.¹⁸ Others demonstrate the legacy effects of the party's perceived central role in Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, following a decades-long occupation.¹⁹ Scholars also show that Hezbollah has acted as a key provider of governance goods, both independently and through the channeling and appropriation of state resources.²⁰ In the wake of the 2026 war, the provision of healthcare and employee salaries appears to have slowed, but not been fundamentally altered, and few alternatives exist to the party's clientelist service provision in historically co-partisan areas.²¹ Indeed, historically, Hezbollah has leveraged reconstruction after conflict with Israel to shore up mass support through the provision of scarce, much-needed governance goods. My forthcoming book, for example, demonstrates how Hezbollah and other wartime political actors coopted local political institutions via reconstruction support following the 1982 Israeli invasion.²² This evidence collectively suggests that,

13 Adam Chamseddine, "Lebanon's PM Mulls Sacking Army Chief Over Hezbollah Disagreements" (*Middle East Eye*, March 11, 2026).

14 Michael Young, "A Mission for Lebanon's Army" (Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2026).

15 For background and one perspective, see Bilal Saab, "Can Lebanon Actually Disarm Hezbollah?" (*Time Magazine*, September 18, 2025).

16 George Hayek, "US Warns Lebanon: Disarm Hezbollah or Lose Army Funds" (*Al Modon*, April 25, 2026).

17 For a summary of the findings, see Jawad Adra, "When Fatigue Becomes a Political Stance: Lebanese Torn Between Rejecting Israel and Accepting Negotiations" (Monthly Magazine, May 20, 2026).

18 For an example focusing on Beirut's southern suburbs, see Mona Harb and Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

19 Aurélie Daher, *Hezbollah: Mobilization and Power* (Hurst, 2024).

20 Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Cornell Press, 2014).

21 Kelly Stedem, "Securing South Lebanon?" (Project on Middle East Political Science: Weak States in the Middle East series, 2026).

22 Christiana Parreira, *The Art of Not Governing: Local Politics and Democratic Decline in Lebanon* (Columbia University Press, 2026).



despite severe damage to its military capacity, Hezbollah's sway among its base will not be easily overturned.

That said, some evidence suggests a growing lack of confidence among Hezbollah's base in the party itself, if not in its core stated objectives. Though fieldwork is logistically difficult, one qualitative study in 2025 found that many of the party's supporters had grown distrustful of its ability to resist Israel successfully and weary of the toll the conflict had taken on the Shia Lebanese community.²³ These sentiments seem likely to deepen if the party is unable to mount a sustained reconstruction effort that includes sustained aid to both its militants and civilian support base. Conversely, if the Lebanese state were able to support such reconstruction programmatically and independently of Hezbollah, this might pose a stronger challenge to the clientelist mechanism by which Hezbollah has maintained electoral power. Electorally, Hezbollah's last test emerged in the May 2025 municipal elections, where its local electoral dominance in Shia areas was largely unchallenged, and its next stress test in national legislative elections has been postponed until 2028.

An overwhelming common sentiment among Lebanese and most international observers is a desire—somehow—to see Lebanese territorial sovereignty restored, both in relation to Israel's occupation and, increasingly, Hezbollah's presence as an armed actor. Yet perspectives diverge radically, and sometimes irreconcilably, on the process and ordering by which to achieve this end goal. Ultimately, absent an exogenous shift or profound diplomatic breakthrough, the current stalemate seems likely to continue and be punctuated by violence, with increasingly dire consequences for the Lebanese public.

23 Sima Ghaddar, "Doubting the Party, Revering Its Ideology: Hezbollah's Battered Constituencies Reckon with a Year of Loss" (The Century Foundation, May 21, 2025).





The Iran War

HOW WASHINGTON HANDED TRUMP THE POWER TO LAUNCH THE 2026 IRAN WAR

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Political scientists have long recognized that comparative politics and international relations are intertwined. The links are especially strong in the study of domestic politics and war. The 2026 Iran War highlighted many core IR concepts and debates that are deeply rooted in domestic politics, including the importance of credible commitments in coercive diplomacy (Fearon 1994; Lupton 2020; Schultz 2001), the role of leaders and political psychology in decision-making (Jervis 1976; Saunders 2011; Yarhi-Milo 2014), and the dynamics of civil-military relations (Feaver 2003; Schake 2025). I will focus on three themes at the intersection of IR and comparative politics that show how President Donald Trump was able to take the United States to war without facing significant constraints: the consolidation of executive power, the role of bureaucracy, and the influence of corruption.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the 2026 Iran War reflected a profound collapse of constraints on the executive. In the run-up to the

war, President Trump did not ask for congressional authorization, did not address the American people, and did not heed the warnings of his own hand-picked military advisers. These warnings echo research findings in international security scholarship, including Caitlin Talmadge's prescient analysis of the Iranian threat to the Strait of Hormuz (2008), Alexander Downes' conclusive finding that foreign-imposed regime change rarely works (2021), and Robert Pape's classic argument that bombing leadership and civilian targets is unlikely to bring the enemy to its knees (1996). Trump not only forged ahead, but when the war did not go as planned, he

threatened that Iran's "whole civilization will die" if its leaders did not agree to a deal, a statement condemned by some of his own supporters.

How did the United States reach this point? As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2019) argue, the collapse of constraints on the presidency was partly the result of an elected leader's assault on the guardrails that restrained him. But in the case of national security policy, there is

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another dimension. As the legal scholar Jack Goldsmith (2020) argued after Trump ordered the strike against a top Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020, “our country has—through presidential aggrandizement accompanied by congressional authorization, delegation, and acquiescence—given one person, the president, a sprawling military and enormous discretion to use it in ways that can easily lead to a massive war. That is our system: One person decides.” By the time Trump took the United States to war in February 2026, American institutions had willingly weakened the specific guardrails surrounding the initiation of military force so that Trump could smash what remained of them with ease.

When he first took office in 2017, the presidency was already enormously powerful in foreign and security policy (Goldgeier and Saunders 2018). Although the Constitution grants Congress the power to declare war, since the end of World War II Congress has delegated more and more power to the executive branch. As the national security state grew during the Cold War, Congress recognized the need for the executive to have its own tools and information sources (Gailmard and Patty 2012).

But this delegation undermined the role of Congress in wartime. Even after the passage of the War Powers Resolution in 1973, presidents sought congressional authorizations only when it was politically useful and likely to be granted. The 9/11 terrorist attacks dramatically accelerated congressional delegation of national security authority to the president, a legacy of executive aggrandizement that we still live with today. President George W. Bush did seek authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) against Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2002). But since then, presidents have relied on the 2001 AUMF in particular to justify military operations far removed from the congressional authorization’s original intent.

While Congress could still constrain the nature and scope of the president’s use of military force through the mechanism of “anticipated reactions,” or forcing the president to adjust policy based on the likely congressional response (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Lindsay 1992), congressional oversight has been steadily declining over many decades (Fowler 2015). Polarization further undermined congressional constraint (Myrick 2025). If members of Congress reflexively support or oppose the president’s national security policy based on partisan identification, then there is not much of a reaction to anticipate.

A president inclined to ignore or attack the remaining guardrails would thus be pushing on an open door. Trump certainly pushed in his first term, but he still faced constraints. Congress occasionally rebuked him, especially on Russia policy and after the killing of the Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The main source of constraint on Trump’s first-term foreign policy, however, came from administration insiders whom he appointed to provide some experience to his team. While Trump chafed against these advisers—souring on appointees like Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly—they were able to constrain some of his most outlandish impulses or keep his actions close to traditional limits. For example, Secretary of Defense James Mattis reportedly restrained Trump’s airstrikes on Syria, and ultimately resigned over Trump’s abrupt, Twitter-announced withdrawal of US forces from Syria.

After his election to a second term in 2024, Trump set out to ensure he would not be constrained by anyone. Trump has not hesitated to confront members of his party to prevent or even undo congressional attempts to constrain him, and the 2026 Iran War illustrates his success on this front. After several failed attempts to pass a war powers measure, on June 23 the Senate passed a resolution previously adopted by the House,



limiting Trump's war powers in the Iran conflict. Just one day later, after an angry Trump post on Truth Social and a heated closed-door meeting between Trump and Senate Republicans on Capitol Hill, two Republicans switched their votes and a nearly identical measure failed on the Senate floor, effectively undoing the rare rebuke (Rimmer 2026).

But Trump's cadre of advisers represent the most dramatic change from his first term to his second. His second-term national security appointments explicitly prized loyalty over experience and competence. Of direct relevance to the Iran War is Trump's remaking of the Pentagon. He appointed the inexperienced Pete Hegseth to be Secretary of Defense, a crucial link in the chain of command that ensures civilian control of the military. Hegseth, presumably with Trump's blessing, immediately fired a group of well-regarded military leaders and lawyers, many of whom were from underrepresented groups. While the president has every right in the American system to replace military officers without cause, Hegseth and Trump's failure to provide information or explanation about the firings and the perceived "purge" of experience in favor of loyalty undermine the norm of professionalism that helps keep civil-military relations healthy (Feaver 2026).

By the time Trump sat in the Situation Room with his advisers to discuss the possibility of attacking Iran, therefore, there was little prospect of any real pushback. Even those with reported doubts, like Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio, did not raise them, presumably for fear of angering a president who seemed to have made up his mind. This dynamic is not new in foreign policy decision-making; analyses of the decision to attack Iraq in 2003, for example, often stress the widespread perception within government that George W. Bush was committed to overthrowing Saddam Hussein from the start, silencing internal debate (Jervis 2008). But Bush expended some political

capital getting congressional approval and made a case to the United Nations, coopting a war skeptic, Secretary of State Colin Powell, into playing the lead role in making that case. The speed and scale of the attack on Iran, which previous presidents (including Bush, and Trump in his first term) had deemed too risky, makes the lack of any serious internal debate or political effort to muster support even more shocking, if no longer surprising.

A second theme of the 2026 Iran War is the role, or lack thereof, of bureaucracies. Comparativists are very familiar with the tension between bureaucratic autonomy and bureaucratic responsiveness to political authority (Dahlström and Lapuente 2022). In decisions about war and peace, this longstanding tension is arguably a productive political feature of policymaking, allowing for both presidential influence and neutral input from a knowledgeable and experienced diplomatic service (Goldfien 2024). To be sure, other presidents, famously including Richard Nixon, have sidelined the State Department. In the decision to attack Iraq, Powell was cut out of the loop and the State Department largely ignored (Saunders 2024:chap. 7). Yet the expertise and professionalism of the foreign service endured and provided essential tools and context for presidential decision-making and diplomacy.

Faced with this natural tension, Trump sought to smash the institution altogether. Trump did significant damage to the State Department in his first term, when scores of experienced officials were either forced out or induced to leave. But almost from the moment he returned to office in 2025, Trump began a direct assault on American diplomacy and soft power. Trump had many allies in this assault, including Elon Musk, given unprecedented power through the so-called DOGE initiative, and Steve Witkoff, a real estate developer and friend of Trump with no diplomatic experience whom Trump nonetheless trusted with the role of Special Envoy. Secretary of State Marco Rubio helped Trump deal a series of blows



to US diplomacy, including the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development, taking a back seat to Witkoff in negotiations, and significant cuts at the State Department.

This systematic attack on the machinery of US diplomacy took the foreign policy bureaucracy out of the 2026 Iran War. Rubio was preoccupied with the aftermath of the US intervention in Venezuela to seize President Nicolás Maduro and his wife from Caracas in January 2026, as well as the US blockade against Cuba. When Trump, emboldened by the apparent ease of the Venezuela operation, turned his sights on Tehran, it was Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner who took on negotiations over a possible deal to replace the Obama-negotiated Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear pact from which Trump withdrew in 2018. But in Geneva, Witkoff and Kushner apparently did not understand the technical details of Iran's proposal, in part because they took no nuclear experts with them (Hillyard, Rohde, and Sherwood 2026). The United States and Israel then launched their attack, making the negotiations seem like a smokescreen, and undermining further attempts at diplomacy once the war started.

Negotiated peace agreements and complex arrangements like the JCPOA require the kind of sustained diplomatic effort, drawing on a wide range of technical and regional expertise, that the State Department is traditionally well-positioned to coordinate. But those experts that remained in government were sidelined during the war (Tau 2026). The absence of the diplomatic apparatus exacerbated an age-old American problem: the failure to understand the adversary (Thomson 1968). In the case of the 2026 Iran War, the breathtaking speed with which the adminis-

tration pivoted from Latin America to the Middle East, while ignoring or deliberately sidelining those with deep knowledge of the region and of Iranian politics, left the president wondering why Iran's leaders did not simply capitulate—an outcome that such experts inside or outside government could have told him was exceedingly unlikely (Lynch and Telhami 2026). The 2026 Iran War is the latest example of the enduring need for the kind of area studies expertise in which comparative politics specializes (King 2015).

Lastly, there is corruption, a topic well-known to comparativists but still relatively new to IR. The 2026 Iran War raises the specter of corruption in the United States government on a scale that seems truly unprecedented.

While claims of war profiteering are not new, reported allegations that officials at the highest levels of the world's most militarily powerful country traded on their knowledge of the timing of attacks and presidential announcements have no modern analog (Agnew et al. 2026; Landers and Adams 2026). Stacie Goddard and Abraham Newman (2025) have argued that the current international order may represent "neoroyalism," in which a group of elites conducts international relations to enrich themselves and entrench their status. The demolishing of guardrails allowed Trump to go down this road; further research is necessary to understand how such corruption emerges and can be combatted in militarily powerful democracies.

Looking across these themes, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in the national security realm, the United States has gone past the "competitive authoritarianism" stage (Levitsky and Way 2025) and reached the point where its policies are those of a personalist dictatorship (Weeks 2014). This is an argument I made with

The absence of the diplomatic apparatus exacerbated an age-old American problem: the failure to understand the adversary



some hesitation in June 2025 (Saunders 2025) but the conclusion seems unavoidable after the 2026 Iran War, which powerfully illustrates that military misadventures are one of the most acute “perils of presidentialism” (Linz 1990). The war may be the result of the biases and actions of one leader, but the trends that put him in a position to launch and prosecute the war with so few constraints lie at the intersection of international and comparative politics. The war’s causes and its effects on the Middle East and on the United States can be most productively studied from that intersection, reinforcing the need for cross-subfield collaboration.

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The Iran War

ISRAEL AFTER 7 OCTOBER: THE WARS AND THE REGIONAL CONTEXT AND THE IMPACT ON DOMESTIC POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND JUDGMENTS

by Mark Tessler



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The first section below provides a brief overview of Israeli perceptions and judgments about the troubling events that marked the region from the Hamas invasion and attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, to the Israeli and US war on Iran, beginning in late February, 2026. The second section provides a brief look at domestic politics and Israeli political attitudes and considers how these have been influenced by regional events.

The Wars and the Regional Context

Regional developments, beginning with Hamas's massive, coordinated and vicious attack of Israeli civilians, carried out inside Israel on 7 October, 2023, followed by Israel's war against the Palestinians in Gaza and then its violent confrontations with Iran and with Hezbollah in Lebanon, are the most important elements of the overarching context that is today impacting domestic politics as Israel begins a runup to national parliamentary elections.

The vast majority of Jewish Israelis reject the characterization of their country's military campaign in Gaza as genocide

Israel responded to the Hamas attack with a devastating and merciless attack of its own. Israel's war in Gaza was directed at Hamas and its infrastructure in Gaza, but also, in the view of many outside Israel, against Gaza's civilian Palestinian population. Israel's war in Gaza was described as a genocide by much of the world, including by scores of human rights organizations, among them those in Israel.

The vast majority of Jewish Israelis reject the characterization of their country's military campaign in Gaza as genocide. They complain that critics fail to appreciate how traumatic the Hamas attack was for Israelis. To them, it seems, that only Palestinian suffering and deaths are being lamented and condemned. Additionally, they insist that Israel could not leave Hamas undisturbed, so that it would retain the ability to carry out new attacks against Israel.

IDF operations in Gaza kept the situation there on Israel's radar screen. Confrontations with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and later Iran, contributed further to shaping the regional context. Beginning in 2024, Israel and Hezbollah traded fire across the Israel-Lebanon border, with



Hezbollah initially acting in support of Hamas and Gaza civilians. Fighting intensified in 2025 and 2026, and an estimated 60,000 Israelis living in northern towns were forced to leave their communities because of Hezbollah shelling.

Israel responded with massive attacks aimed at Hezbollah forces and installations, and also at much of the civilian population in the south of Lebanon. To critics, this was excessive and unjustified, deliberately making the south of Lebanon unlivable. To Israelis, leaving the country's north under the guns of Hezbollah was intolerable. By spring 2026, according to newspaper and other sources, almost 4,000 Lebanese had been killed and 12,000 had been wounded. An Israel Democracy Institute poll taken at this time found that four out of five Jewish Israelis think Israel should continue its campaign in Lebanon.

Israel's "12-Day War" with Iran, in June 2025, further shaped the regional environment. Israel attacked Iranian military and nuclear targets and assassinated a number of top leaders and scientists. Iran responded with missiles and drones, most of which were intercepted. Fighting ended when the US and Qatar brokered a ceasefire. According to best estimates, 1,200 Iranians were killed and about 6,000 were injured; figures for Israel are 28 and about 3,500.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu successfully persuaded Donald Trump to launch a joint military campaign against Iran, and the two countries began coordinated operations in February 2026. The damage to Iranian military installations was substantial, and there were also significant civilian casualties. Iran struck back with missiles and drones directed not only at Israel but also at American military installations in GCC countries and at some installations belonging to GCC countries. Iran also closed the Strait of Hormuz, preventing export of the petroleum and natural gas that flowed through

the strait.

At the time of this writing, in July 2026, and despite the punishment that Iran was continuing to suffer, the Islamic Republic remained able to resist, and its closure of the Strait of Hormuz was putting economic and political pressure on the US. Indeed, so far, none of the US and Israeli objectives for the war have been accomplished. A fragile 60-day ceasefire was agreed to by the US and Iran in April, but fighting nonetheless continued and it is unclear when and how, and with what concessions, the war will eventually come to an end.

The Iran war is very unpopular in the US, and this has strained Israel's critical relationship with the US. Indeed, American unease about the devastating Israeli campaign in Gaza had already seriously strained Israel-US relations. According to recent polls, more Americans sympathize with Palestinians than with Israelis. Finally, the US opposes Israel's continuing military campaign in Lebanon, but the campaign is very popular at home, with Israelis insisting that the country's security should not be subject to veto by a foreign power, even the US.

Many of the Israeli military actions undertaken in the wake of the 7 October Hamas attack have been widely and vigorously condemned. But it is necessary to consider how these actions are perceived and interpreted in Israel if their impact on Israeli domestic politics is to be understood.

What politically-relevant attitudes and judgments do ordinary Israelis, particularly Jewish Israelis, but of necessity Israel's non-Jewish citizens as well, take away from the charged regional environment and the war, death and destruction through which they have lived since the Hamas invasion and attack of 7 October?

Information with which to fashion answers to this broad question come from numerous public opinion polls, from reports and analyses by various and differing news



organizations, and from the reports, articles and policy papers published by policy-focused institutions, particularly the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) but also others, such as the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS).

Complicated and negative attitudes toward Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are one noteworthy through-line. Netanyahu has given the orders for Israel's military campaigns, and judgments about Israel's wars are usually laid at Netanyahu's doorstep. Thus, with respect to the Gaza war, an August 2025 INSS poll reported that 54 percent of those sampled believed the war was not being fought primarily for security reasons, or, for 65 percent, in a way that prioritized bringing home the Israeli hostages captured by Hamas. Accordingly, 70 percent expressed low to no confidence in Netanyahu.

According to a June 2026 IDI poll, negative judgments about Netanyahu had improved a bit, principally because most Israelis supported the IDF campaign in Lebanon, but attitudes were still quite negative. Sixty-one percent stated that Netanyahu should not run for prime minister, as leader of a right-wing Likud-led coalition, in the coming elections. Only 40 percent of Jewish Israelis, and only 10 percent of non-Jewish Israelis, were optimistic about the future of Israel's national security. Even on the political Right, only 54 percent were optimistic. Further reflecting the national mood, 74 percent stated that there is no political party in which they feel at home.

Reservations and negative judgments about Israel's military campaign in Gaza should not be understood as expressing sympathy for Gaza's Palestinian population.

It is not entirely clear how much ordinary Israelis have known, or wanted to know, about what was happening to these Palestinians. Conversations with a number of Israelis suggest that mainstream Israeli media showed physical destruction but not the injury and death among Gaza's Palestinian population, including its children.

Further, many Israelis justified the destruction of infrastructure and residential areas, stating that it was necessary to protect Israeli soldiers and prevent future attacks, even as Israeli human rights organizations were

calling the IDF campaign in Gaza a genocide. A July 2025 Hebrew University poll showed that an overwhelming majority of Jewish Israelis agree with the genocidal idea that there are "no innocents in Gaza." In support of ethnic cleansing, popularly described as "transfer" in Israel, Israel's Defense Minister, as reported in The Guardian, affirmed that "large-scale migration of Palestinians" is part of Israel's plan for Gaza.

It is not possible to give a thorough and detailed account of Israeli domestic politics, as the country heads toward elections. But a general picture can be offered.

First, the important axis of political competition is between political parties on the right, led by Likud, and Beyachad, an electoral alliance of centrist parties led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. Also, on the Right, Netanyahu and Likud are being challenged by a new party, Yashar, led by former IDF Chief of Staff, Gadi Eisenkot.

Each bloc hopes that its parties will win enough seats in the coming election to form a governing coalition, which requires 61 or more seats in the 120-seat Knesset. In recent years, the right-wing bloc has relied on two extremist parties: Religious Zionism, led by Bezalel Smotrich,

There is uncertainty not only about the results and likely consequences of the coming Israeli election, but also about what will come next in the region, and what it will mean for Israel



and Otzma Yehudit, usually described as fascist, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir. Recent opinion polls suggest that the two parties are likely, together, to win 13 or 14 seats. Accordingly, unless Likud and Yashar form an alliance, which at present seems unlikely, a Netanyahu-led coalition would not have the 61 Knesset seats needed to govern without the two extremist parties.

Centrist parties may not emerge from the election with enough seats to form a governing coalition. To get to 61, they might need to bring Palestinian-Arab parties into the coalition. There are four parties that get most of their votes in the Arab sector, and their orientations are, respectively, Islamist, communist, nationalist, and generally anti-Zionist. They have often formed electoral alliances, with membership changing from time to time, and a subset will do so again in the 2026 election.

Between them, these parties captured 10 seats in the 2022 election, and that might be enough, if they are included, for the centrist bloc to reach the critical number of 61. But having non-Jewish parties in the governing coalition has traditionally been something of a taboo, and it is something that centrist parties have pledged not to do.

Domestic issues will also shape attitudes and votes. Most prominent is whether ultraorthodox Jewish Israelis should remain exempt from military service and receive stipends so that they may devote themselves to Torah study rather than join the workforce. Most Israelis oppose these exemptions and stipends, and resentment has increased because of the burden that Israel's military adventures place on the IDF and reservists. It is unlikely that accommodations for the ultraorthodox will be removed, primarily because the principal ultraorthodox party, Shas, which won 12 seats in the 2022 election, would be needed to form a governing coalition.

There is uncertainty not only about the results and likely consequences of the coming Israeli election, but also about what will come next in the region, and what it will mean for Israel. Five sets of take-away questions merit reflection.

Lebanon. Will the IDF remain in south Lebanon? If not, what does the future hold for the Lebanese population of south Lebanon and for governance of the area? If not, will there be security in the north of Israel?

Gaza. Will more Israelis come to understand why much of the world considers their country's actions in Gaza to be a genocide? What will the reconstruction and development of Gaza look like? Will Jewish Israeli settlements return to Gaza? Will there be mass expulsion of Gaza Palestinians?

Iran. Will Israel renew attacks on Iran? Will a strengthened Iran, directly or through its proxies, launch new attacks on Israel? Will Iran keep control of the Strait of Hormuz, and with what implications for Israel?

Abraham Accords. Israel's relations with the UAE appear to have grown stronger since October 7. Otherwise, will any Arab signatories, perhaps Bahrain, withdraw from the accord? Will any additional Arab countries sign on to the accord?

United States. Will the current strain in American-Israeli relations lead to a deeper and lasting rupture? Will relations return to the strong alliance that preceded the Gaza war and the war with Iran?





In Memoriam: Dr. Raúl Pacheco-Vega

IN MEMORIAM: DR. RAÚL PACHECO-VEGA (1973–2026)

by Raúl Pacheco-Vega's colleagues at FLACSO, Mexico



Raúl Pacheco-Vega
was Full Professor in
the Methods Lab, Latin
American Faculty
for Social Sciences
(FLACSO), Mexico.

The academic community mourns the passing of Dr. Raúl Pacheco-Vega, who passed away on May 31, 2026. His sudden departure leaves a profound void across Latin American social sciences, where he was celebrated as a brilliant researcher, an inspiring mentor, and a deeply generous colleague.

Dr. Pacheco-Vega was an extraordinary scholar whose career was defined by rigor, discipline, and a deep public vocation. His pioneering work in public policy, environmental governance, water and waste management, public services, and research methodology made invaluable contributions to the social sciences both within and beyond Mexico. An internationally recognized researcher, he possessed a unique ability to bridge disciplines, institutions, countries, and generations. For the last six years of his life, FLACSO México served as his academic home, where his intellectual leadership deeply enriched the institution.

Beyond his extensive publications, lectures, and academic distinctions, Dr. Pacheco-Vega's true legacy lies in his warmth and human quality. As a dedicated professor, he taught research methods not as abstract formulas, but as vital tools to think clearly, work rigorously, and engage meaningfully with public life. He provided his students

with structure, tailored bibliographies, ongoing encouragement, and, above all, the assurance that they were never alone in their scholarly journey.

Among colleagues, he was cherished for his approachability, humor, and spirit of collaboration. In an academic environment that can often feel competitive or isolated, Dr. Pacheco-Vega actively practiced a culture grounded in generosity, care, and mutual support. He celebrated others' achievements, shared resources freely, fostered open dialogue, and continually built supportive academic networks.

Dr. Pacheco-Vega leaves behind a legacy that lives on through the students he mentored, the projects he inspired, and the colleagues whose lives he touched. The best tribute to his memory is to honor his commitment to scholarship—continuing to learn with seriousness, freedom, and integrity—while striving to make our broader academic community a more generous and human space. We express our deepest solidarity and condolences to his family, friends, students, and colleagues during this time of profound loss.





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