

U.S. IRAN CONFLICT TIMELINE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The relationship between the U.S. and Iran has been marked by extended periods of conflict and hostility. The tension intensified in 2018, when the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),¹ and the reinstatement of rigorous sanctions as part of the 'Maximum Pressure' campaign, followed by the targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani by the U.S. in 2020.² This marked a significant shift in U.S. actions toward Iran as it directly engaged in the killing of a senior Iranian military figure.

Since 2026, following the Israel-Iran conflict, the U.S. administration's focus has shifted from Iran's nuclear program to a wider struggle for regional dominance, the security of Israel, and the balance of power in the Middle East.

Regionalization of the Conflict

Since Israel's attack on Gaza and the expansion of the conflict to Iran, Tehran's retaliation has not only transformed the security dynamics in the region but also significantly altered the nature of the U.S.-Iran conflict. For many in the U.S., this escalation prompted Tehran's "Axis of Resistance" network to

¹ Steve P. Mulligan, "Withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal: Legal Authorities and Implications," *U.S. Congress*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB10134>

² Statement by the Department of Defense, *U.S. Department of Defense*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2049534/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/>

engage actively on multiple fronts, resulting in confrontations between U.S. forces and Iran-aligned militias.³

The Axis of Resistance serves to connect Iran with various allied armed groups and political movements across Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Palestinian territory. This framework enables Iran to exert influence on U.S. and Israeli interests throughout the region by leveraging these partnerships, rather than engaging in direct state-to-state confrontations.

The regionalization of the conflict reached a critical point in April 2024, when Iran and Israel exchanged direct attacks for the first time, marking a departure from decades of indirect warfare and lowering the threshold for overt conflict between the two nations. This regionalization included:

- The U.S. prioritized support for Israel over active measures against Iran, providing military assistance, intelligence, and naval resources.
- As a result, the conflict subsequently extended to multiple regions, including Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq.
- The U.S. also intensified its military involvement in Yemen, conducting direct operations against Houthi targets.
- The geopolitical landscape has experienced significant changes due to the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, the weakening of Hezbollah, and the unwavering support from the Trump administration.
- In June 2025, Israel undertook military actions in Iran, which was followed by the U.S. launching strikes on key nuclear sites located in Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz.⁴ This escalation further shifted traditional proxy warfare to direct military engagement involving both the U.S. and Israel against Iran.

February 2026: Operation Epic Fury

- U.S. and Israel executed coordinated assaults on Iranian military and nuclear infrastructure under the operation 'Epic Fury.' The U.S. used its F-18 and F-35 fighter jets in this combined

³ Clayton Thomas, "Iran: Background and U.S. Policy," *U.S. Congress*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47321>

⁴ "Iran's Nuclear Facilities Have Been Obliterated — and Suggestions Otherwise are Fake News," *White House*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/releases/2025/06/irans-nuclear-facilities-have-been-obliterated-and-suggestions-otherwise-are-fake-news/>

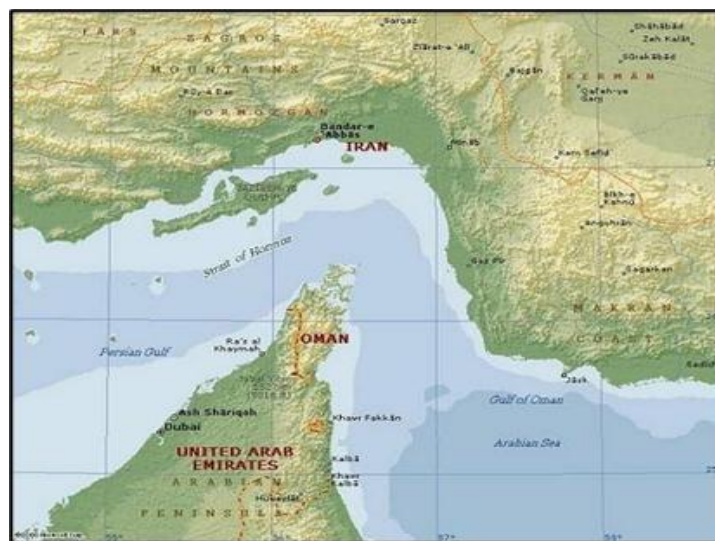
operation, conducting 900 strikes, with almost 500 hitting Iranian targets.⁵ The onslaught resulted in the deaths of 178 girls, between the ages of 7 and 12 years, due to an American strike on the Shajareh Tayyebah Girls' Elementary School in Minab.⁶

- The conflict intensified after the targeted killing of Ayatollah Khamenei on February 28. It represented a significant strike against Tehran's political and ideological foundation, raising the stakes for Iran.

Iran's Response

Iran characterized February 2026 attacks as an act of war, and in retaliation blocked the Strait of Hormuz, deployed naval mines, and launched ballistic missiles and drones aimed at sites in Israel and the U.S. military in the Gulf region, including the U.S. naval complex in Bahrain.

The following map illustrates the Strait of Hormuz, a strategically significant choke point between Iran and Oman.



Source: Strauss Center⁷

The execution of Khamenei, coupled with the school attack, transformed the conflict from a strategic engagement into an active state of conflict. Additionally, this compelled Tehran to extend the war

⁵ "Iran Update Evening Special Report, February 28, 2026" *Institute for the Study of War*, February 28, 2026, <https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/iran-update-evening-special-report-february-28-2026/>

⁶ Amman "The Brutality of War Measured in Children's Lives as Hostilities Escalate in Iran," *United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund*, March 5, 2026, <https://www.unicef.org.nz/media-releases/the-brutality-of-war-measured-in-childrens-lives-as-hostilities-escalate-in-iran>

⁷ "Strait of Hormuz: Assessing the Threat to Oil Flows Through the Strait," *Strauss Center*, <https://www.strausscenter.org/strait-of-hormuz-geography/>

beyond its borders to U.S. military bases in the region. The objective was not only to inflict damage but to show that attacking Iranian territories and killing the Supreme Leader would carry a direct cost for the U.S. and Israel.

March 2026: Intensification of War

The escalation between the U.S. and Iran has involved a series of strategic military actions. The U.S. and Israel have conducted airstrikes targeting Iranian military, nuclear, and strategic facilities.

- The U.S. strikes have specifically aimed at Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) installations, military bases, naval assets, and crucial sites, including Kharg Island, a significant hub of oil exports. As strikes continue, the U.S. and Israel have conducted airstrikes on Iran's oil facilities, particularly those in the Southern Pars region. In retaliation, Iran has targeted liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities in Qatar, while the U.S. has made efforts to re-establish navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

The map below shows that U.S. and Israeli military operations have focused on Kharg Island, Iran's main oil export hub off the southern Gulf coast. This Island is linked to the mainland through the Genaveh-Kharg pipeline. Given Kharg Island's intricate network of pipelines, storage tanks, and export facilities, even minor attacks could disrupt Iran's oil shipments and further pressure global energy markets.

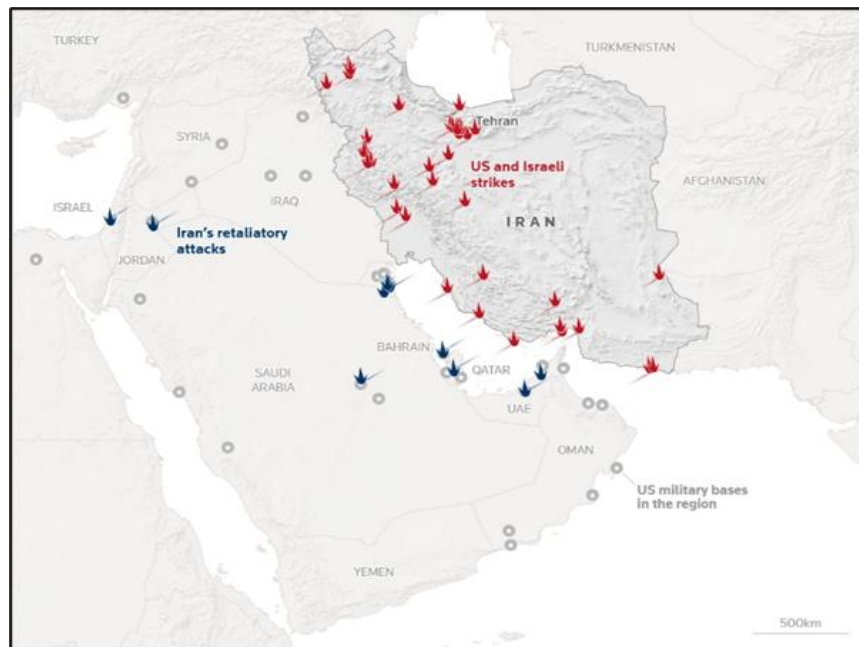


Source: Reuters⁸

⁸ Mariano Zafra, "Gulf Oil Producers Scramble to Bypass Hormuz as Iran Locks Down the Strait," *Reuters*, March 17, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/IRAN-CRISIS/MAPS/znpnmelervl/>

- The regional implications of these conflicts have been significant, with Iranian attacks on Gulf infrastructure and maritime operations impacting Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.
- In late March 2026, discussions for de-escalation were initiated, leading to a suspension of planned U.S. strikes on Iranian energy facilities amidst diplomatic negotiations. Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey facilitated these communications, culminating in a 15-point proposal Pakistan submitted to Iran. The proposal seeks to address various critical issues, including the ongoing conflict, matters about the Strait of Hormuz, missile capabilities, sanctions, and Iran's nuclear program.
- This ongoing conflict underscores the limitations inherent in military superiority. Despite the U.S. possessing a significant conventional military advantage, Iran has demonstrated the capacity to impose costs through its missile and drone capabilities, as well as maritime pressure. Created a security dilemma, in which both parties have misinterpreted each other's defensive measures as potential threats.

The following map illustrates the military operations conducted by the U.S. and Israel in Iran and Tehran's retaliatory response.



Source: Reuters ⁹

⁹ Mariano Zafra and Jon McClure, "Where U.S. and Israeli Forces Struck Iran," *Reuters*, March 1, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/IRAN-CRISIS/MAPS/znpnmelervl/>

The Board of Peace and the Ceasefire

The Board of Peace was launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 22, 2026, with Trump as Chairman. It was a primary mechanism for executing the Gaza peace framework and promoting wider U.S.-led diplomatic efforts in the region. The Board consists of 27 member states, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Qatar, and Turkey.

Salient features of the Board include:¹⁰

- Oversee the comprehensive transition in Gaza following the ceasefire, including governing through a technocratic Palestinian body, the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG),¹¹ until the Palestinian Authority completes its reforms and regains control.
- Set the framework and manage funding for Gaza's reconstruction, as well as negotiating the complete disarmament of Hamas and other armed groups, including the dismantling of tunnels and the removal of weapons.
- Commitment to provide \$17 billion for humanitarian relief and reconstruction efforts in Gaza, including funding of \$10billion¹² from the U.S. and \$ 7 billion from nine other member states, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kuwait.
- A 20,000-member International Stabilization Force (ISF) has been designated to maintain security and monitor the disarmament of Hamas, with troop contributions anticipated from Morocco, Albania, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, and Indonesia. Furthermore, Egypt and Jordan have pledged to help train police in Gaza.
- The reconstruction efforts in Gaza necessitate the removal of 70 million tons of debris, along with plans that include establishing temporary housing for nearly 2 million displaced individuals and a long-term master plan envisioning the development of skyscrapers, new urban areas, and a coastal tourism zone, with costs projected to be at least \$25 billion.

In July 2026, the Board successfully negotiated a disarmament agreement with Hamas, highlighted as a significant step toward increasing assistance deliveries. Israel's disengagement remains contingent

¹⁰ Edmarverson A. Santos, "The Board of Peace vs International Law," *Diplomacy and Law*, <https://www.diplomacyandlaw.com/post/the-board-of-peace-vs-international-law>

¹¹ "Statement on President Trump's Comprehensive Plan to End Gaza's Conflict," *White House*, January 10, 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2026/01/statement-on-president-trumps-comprehensive-plan-to-end-the-gaza-conflict/>

¹² Tiago Ventura, "Five Key Takeaways From Trump's First Gaza Board of Peace Meeting," *Time*, February 20, 2026, <https://time.com/7379788/trump-gaza-board-of-peace-first-meeting-takeaways/>

upon the full disarmament of Hamas. Furthermore, Hamas has indicated that it will not comply with disarmament demands unless Israel fulfills its own obligation. However, the Board does not directly mediate discussions between the U.S. and Iran; it operates within the broader regional diplomatic framework.

Islamabad Talks

On April 8, Pakistan successfully brokered a two-week truce between the U.S. and Iran through a dialogue that became known as the Islamabad Talks.¹³ The talks spanned 21 hours over two days and included three rounds: an initial indirect round, followed by two rounds of direct negotiations. The U.S. was represented by a 300-member delegation led by Vice President JD Vance, accompanied by envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. Iran was represented by a 70-member delegation headed by Speaker Mohammad Bagher and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. Pakistan played a mediating role in the discussions, which Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir chaired.

- *Phase I:* The initial segment comprised indirect discussions, wherein representatives from the U.S. and Iran communicated through intermediaries from Pakistan. This phase aimed to establish common ground and assess both parties' willingness to move to direct negotiations.
- *Phase II:* The negotiations advanced to direct, face-to-face discussions during Phase II, marking a significant level of engagement between the U.S. and Iran. During this phase, delegations from both countries met directly and had focused discussions on key elements of a ceasefire framework, with particular emphasis on the Strait of Hormuz and Iran's nuclear enrichment program.
- *Phase III:* The final round of negotiations witnessed a renewed focus on directly addressing the outstanding issues. This phase was based on Iran's comprehensive 10-point proposal, which outlined several key demands, including a commitment to U.S. non-aggression, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from regional bases, sanctions relief, the continuation of Iranian control over the Strait of Hormuz, recognition of Iran's right to uranium enrichment, and the implementation of a ceasefire that would extend to Lebanon.

¹³ "Iran, US Receive Plan to End Hostilities, Immediate Ceasefire, Source Says," *Reuters*, April 6, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/iran-us-receive-plan-end-hostilities-immediate-ceasefire-source-says-2026-04-06/>

- In response, the U.S. presented its own 15-point framework, emphasizing the need for the end of uranium enrichment, the dismantling of Iran's proxy network, and oversight by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- The discussion concluded without reaching an agreement. Iran declined the initial 45-day framework and proposed its own set of criteria for consideration. The truce was ultimately extended, despite ongoing military threats from President Trump. This transition from active conflict to diplomatic discussions in Islamabad underscored the realization that neither party could achieve a sustainable solution through military action only. In a follow-up, Iran briefly opened the Strait of Hormuz, then reimposed restrictions after the U.S. violated the agreement.

The U.S. and Iran have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to resolve issues related to the nuclear program, sanctions, and navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. Trump characterized Iran's proposal as a "workable basis"¹⁴ and suggested that many of the contentious issues had been agreed upon; the final consensus was formalized in the Islamabad MOU signed on June 17, 2026.¹⁵ This included ending military strikes, lifting the U.S. naval blockade, reopening the Strait of Hormuz, and temporarily waiving sanctions. The more complex issues concerning nuclear enrichment, missile development, and Iran's regional militias remained unresolved and were postponed, ultimately leading to the collapse of the MOU in July 2026.

Nonetheless, the MOU was unsuccessful, leading the U.S. to reimpose a naval embargo on Iran. Concurrently, hostilities between Yemen's Houthis and the Saudi military have intensified. The conflict has shifted from direct military engagement to economic and maritime pressure. The U.S. has opted for economic measures as a more cost-effective, non-escalatory approach rather than military action. In response, Iran has leveraged its control over maritime routes to enhance its position in the ongoing situation.

August 2026: Hormuz and Renewed Diplomacy

The collapse of the Islamabad MOU in July has reoriented attention toward the Strait of Hormuz. Oman has now assumed the role of primary mediator in an effort to renew diplomatic efforts to end

¹⁴ "Iranian 10 Point Proposal 'Workable Basis', Trump Says," *Middle East Eye*, April 7, 2026, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/live-blog/live-blog-update/iranian-10-point-proposal-workable-basis-trump-says>

¹⁵ "Curtain Raiser: High-Level Talks on the Implementation of Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding (Burgenstock, Switzerland – 21 June, 2026)," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan*, June 21, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/curtain-raiserhigh-level-talks-on-the-implementation-of-islamabad-memorandum-of-understanding-burgenstock-switzerland-21-june-2026>

the U.S.-Iran war. The new peace venture focuses predominantly on ensuring the safe passage of commercial shipping. As the blockade continues, commercial vessels are facing significant issues such as misdirection, incapacitation, or boarding. Iran has issued warnings of a potential resumption of hostilities should diplomatic discussions not yield results, while simultaneously using the current ceasefire period to enhance its military and missile capabilities.¹⁶

Iran and Oman are finalizing an interim maritime agreement to establish authorized routes for commercial vessels navigating the Strait of Hormuz. This agreement remains incomplete and has not yet been implemented. Progress in discussions has been hindered by Iran's demands, including requests for sanctions relief and the relaxation of the U.S. embargo; however, the U.S. continues to pursue a comprehensive accord.¹⁷

Both parties appear to be negotiating, except that one will ultimately yield. The U.S. believes economic pressure will compel Iran to relent, while Iran maintains it can endure the associated costs long enough to secure more favorable conditions for passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

Conclusion

The evolution of the U.S. Iran conflict highlights a shift from nuclear issues and political distrust to a broader spectrum of regional power dynamics. The conflict has highlighted the complex nature of security and the impact of war beyond the borders, contributing to regional instability and heightened tension across the Middle East. Moreover, disruption in the Strait of Hormuz has created significant challenges beyond the region, affecting global energy costs. Despite significant divides, diplomacy remains essential, as neither nation can achieve a lasting resolution through military means alone; the conflict also underscores how an unresolved bilateral issue can escalate into a larger geopolitical and economic crisis with far-reaching global implications.

¹⁶ "US Forces Redirected 48 Vessels Under Iran Blockade – CENTCOM," *Iran International*, August 5, 2026, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202608055618>

¹⁷ Nayera Abdallah, Steve Holland, and Enas Alashray, "Iran Says Oman Deal is in 'Final Stages', But US Must Act to Open Hormuz," *Reuters*, August 10, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/iran-says-oman-deal-is-final-stages-us-must-act-open-hormuz-2026-08-09/>