

February 28, 2026

Featuring Mark Dubowitz and Richard Goldberg

Moderated by Jonathan Schanzer

SCHANZER: Good evening. It is 9:00 pm here; February 28th in Washington. It is 4:00 am in Israel, March 1st. It's 5:30 am in Tehran, and we have just gone through nearly one full day of war, a historic war that broke out at 2:00 am this morning, Eastern Time. I'm Jonathan Schanzer, executive director at FDD. I've got with me Mark Dubowitz, CEO of FDD. And I've got Rich Goldberg, senior advisor from FDD. And we are here tonight to break down for the next half hour what we have seen transpire in the region. An absolute historic day.

I want to start with this. Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran, extreme leader of Iran, exterminated leader of Iran. This man is now confirmed dead. The Israelis said it earlier today. People were not sure that it was true. Now we're seeing in the Iranian media that they're confirming that he is no longer breathing. Mark Dubowitz, I want to get your reaction to this and the reaction to all of the others. There were something like 39, 40 others that were killed today. This was mostly Israeli work, if not all of it. Your reaction to what we saw?

DUBOWITZ: Look, John, it's extraordinary. I mean, it reminds me of when President Trump killed Qassem Soleimani. And I remember seeing the reports and I didn't believe it. I just thought, "This is impossible." Like, they've been going after Soleimani for years. Never got him. This is ten times more important. The fact that they've taken out Khamenei, who's the longest serving dictator in the world. He's been in power since 1989. He's been responsible for the murder and maiming of, really, hundreds of thousands of people: Americans, Israelis, Europeans, Middle Easterners.

The fact that he is dead is remarkable. The fact that they got him in Tehran in his compound is remarkable – in the middle of the day. It just it really speaks to the incredible intelligence dominance the Israelis have and the and the targeting power of the Israeli Air Force.

But it also speaks to what was Khamenei thinking. I mean, what the hell was he doing in his compound in broad daylight, Tehran time, as opposed to being twenty floors under a bunker? Given the fact that the Israelis have done this over and over again, in killing [Hassan] Nasrallah and [Yahya] Sinwar and [Ismail] Haniyeh, and the list goes on and on. So, what was he thinking? I think it just speaks to the arrogance of the man and his belief that he was immune.

SCHANZER: So, talk to us. I mean, absolutely idiotic. And by the way, it sounds like they held a meeting with some of the top leaders, and that was actually the thing that I think prompted the Israelis and the United States to agree that it was go time. That they had intel on all these people getting together from the regime, talking about whatever their plans were next, whether it was about negotiations or whether it was about making a dash to a nuke or something else. But now we've got these other, you know, 40 people killed. Give us maybe, if you would, just the – the greatest hits, so to speak. I mean, what do we know about this list? It seems significant.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I mean, the – the Israelis mostly, I mean, that – they've been going after leadership assets, and they've taken out some of the biggest names. I mean, Ali Shamkhani, who's the secretary of Iran's Defense Council. He's really one of the central figures in Iran's security decision making apparatus. He was a close advisor to Khamenei on security affairs.

They took out the commander of the IRGC, who took over from General [Hossein] Salami, who was killed in the 12-Day War. [General] Mohammad Pakpour has been in power since June, or in this role since June 2025, and was really the key architects of what Israel described as Iran's plan to destroy Israel. So certainly, he had a bloody track record of commanding their central military force, the deployment of strategic fire systems against Israel. He supported these Iranian backed militant organizations across multiple fronts. Then you had Salah Asadi, who was the head of intelligence for Iran's emergency command. He was a senior intelligence officer within the General Staff. Mohammad Shirazi, who headed the military office of Khamenei since '89, and, really, was one of the key guys coordinating between the senior armed services commanders and the supreme leader and was a key figure right at the top of Iran's power structure.

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I'll just highlight a couple quick ones as well. Aziz Nasirzadeh, who is the Iranian defense minister, former Air Force commander. And Hossein Jabal Amelian, who was the head of SPND [Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research], and SPND was the organization responsible for Iran's weaponization program. The Israelis also took out Reza Mozaffari Nia, who was the former head of SPND. So, they took out two of the top guys responsible for Iran's nuclear weaponization activities. And that's just six or seven that I highlighted. There's 30, 40 others.

SCHANZER: Amazing. I mean, truly remarkable when you talk about, you know, the impact here. We're talking about nothing less than regime change, even though that's not exactly been the focus highlighted by Donald Trump. You know, I think he's been a little gun shy about saying regime change is ultimately his goal. The Israelis, I think, have no compunction about framing it that way. But really, when you look at the evisceration of that top level of leadership it really does leave a lot of questions now.

Rich, I want to get to you to talk to you about what happened today from a kinetic perspective. You know, obviously things have been going now for almost 24 hours. My understanding is that the Israelis were doing most of the dirty work as it relates to taking out these top leaders. And they were also hunting for missiles and missile launchers. I understand that the US was focused primarily on the nuclear sites – whatever's left of them – as well as other core military infrastructure.

But I guess I want to ask you, how complicated was this? To have two militaries completely synchronized doing this over the skies of Iran, which is not yet devoid of all air defenses? So, the IFF issue, the identify friend or foe, had to have not been easy. And you got aircraft carriers you got flights coming in from Jerusalem. You've got – I'm guessing, you know, you got refueling in mid-air. This seems like a hell of a lot going on. Talk to us about what happened today.

GOLDBERG: Well, you're right, Jon, this is an unprecedented level of coordination. Not just between the United States and Israel, though primarily there, but also, it would appear, other partners and allies involved in different ways. The Brits, for example, appearing to be involved in some of the defensive operations, which we'll talk about.

But listen, this is one of the advantages of having a close military relationship forward – near a threat to the United States – with a democracy, with an ally like Israel. And having a defense partnership program where Israel is able to buy main battle platforms from the United States and modify them, potentially improve on them, test them in battle, give us the after actions, and then we are able to train and exercise on coordinating between US platforms – our US platforms and their US platforms in the sky. So the computer systems, the – the tactics, the techniques, the procedures, all of that – that these pilots are going through, the, you know, all that we would do for air to air refueling, for all the logistical support, the intel communication, all that is not only exercised upon, but it's made easier by the fact that we're all talking on – on American made platforms.

Now, that doesn't mean this is easy. This is breathtaking, quite frankly. The number of fighter jets from Israel, the number of fighter jets from the United States, two carrier strike groups. There is a just historic amount of firepower in the sky when you combine the United States and Israeli air forces, plus the naval assets, the naval power of the United States, which we are told from the media through sources in the Pentagon is being employed. And you're right, from what we can understand now, we're obviously waiting on a briefing from the Pentagon, which we would expect at some point when they're ready to brief with the initial battle damage assessments. Perhaps that will come after a day or two in their first stage. We've seen some of these reports that potentially there's a staged approach. A number of – of target sets that they're working through. This is going to be the initial phase that allows them to then move into new phases. That could be part of what you hear of making sure the United States and Israel own the skies completely over Iran. So, any residual air defense, any build back of air defense since the 12-Day War, that's being taken out as a priority, likely by the United States military and the Israelis.

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You have the dynamic targeting that's going on from the United States and Israel. Again, if there's going to be a launch, if you get a missile off that came from a launcher. You're going to have a point of – of origin very quickly. You're going to take out the launcher. If there is not a solid fuel mobile missile system, but rather a liquid fuel, and it's going to take a little bit of time to fuel the missile, you're going to be on the lookout. You're going to find and you're going to destroy before they get the missile off. If there are fast boats launching out of some of the IRGC Navy ports, you're going to have folks in the sky looking for that and taking out those boats before they can do anything to our ships, to maritime traffic, to oil infrastructure, or in some way mine the Strait. So, I think a lot of that is going on.

Iran is taking a lot of – the Islamic Republic is taking a lot of damage to their missile, drone, and naval infrastructure up front and their air defenses. And then the question is, what sites are more fixed? Are going to require deeper munitions, other kinds of strategic air type assets? You know, sort of what you saw with the B-2 last year in Operation Midnight Hammer, some of the underground facilities that might need a heavier hand. Are we hitting those already? Do we need more assets for that? That's going to come next, I think, to make sure we've really removed all of their nuclear and missile threats.

But, you know, with the Israelis going after the human targets while the United States is – is decapitating their military capability, the Israelis are decapitating their human capital. And there is a major brain drain. I mean, you just heard Mark go through that list here. Remember the brain drain that – that that occurred to the regime? The supreme leader losing Soleimani in that strike in 2020 was devastating. It put the IRGC Quds Force into a real bind, because so many balls were in the air that only Qassem Soleimani knew about and had. And he was the closest advisor to the supreme leader on all of his strategy in the Middle East. He started relying increasingly on Hassan Nasrallah for so much strategy, and the Israelis took him out.

Now this regime is lost. You know, their top strategists. We were already dealing with the B-team for a while under the supreme leader. You're now moving into the C-team. You're in – you're in – you know, you're in single A-minor leagues being put in charge of the regime at this point. And you're hitting command and control targets at the same time. I think that's why you saw in the president's video this view that at some point, when it is safe to come out, there needs to be also a plan on the ground for the people of Iran to try to take their country back.

SCHANZER: Okay. Perfect segue, Rich. It's like if you just read my mind.

Mark, I'm seeing some videos right now of people out on the streets celebrating, and they're not getting crushed by the regime. I'm hearing that various exile groups are maybe trying to get a little closer to Tehran so they can fly home, if and when the time comes.

What's the mood in Iran? I know you're talking to a lot of Iranians, the expats. What is the thinking right now about what comes next? Are they ready? Do they have any idea how to maneuver people properly to get the regime out and to get the right people in, or are we still too early on in this process?

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. I just want to add one thing to what Rich said, and he mentioned nuclear sites. I mean, I – I know Rich is also watching closely as I am the Pickaxe Mountain, which is this facility near Natanz, that the Iranians are going much deeper than even Fordo. You know, one hundred meters underground, hardened under a mountain, probably are going to probably want to use it as an enrichment facility for centrifuge manufacturing, for weaponization. So, I'm looking to see whether the US Air Force – and it will be the US Air Force – once again flies B-2 bombers and massive ordnance penetrators. Because if you don't take out Pickax Mountain, then the Iranians can go deep, they can harden, and they can emerge out of this with a site from which they can enrich and weaponize. So, I think it's very important in the days ahead we look at Pickax Mountain.

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With respect to Iranians, yeah, it is. I mean, it's elation. You know, it's absolute elation, absolute joy to see at the end of Khomeini. I mean, I've been calling for Khamenei's elimination for quite a while. I think our head of security has been telling me not to, but I think it's been really important to make that case because he is more than just a symbol. He is a – he's a brutal, not only dictator, but he is directing and managing, and he has very close loyalty to many of the top leaders within the Iranian system. And to take out Khomeini and eliminate him is – is really shaking the system.

I'm also looking at who's going to come next. I mean, I think there's been rumors for quite some time that he's appointed his son, Mojtaba. Who, believe it or not, is more psychotic and more extreme than Ali Khamenei. So, I think it's going to be very important if the Israelis and the Americans can find Mojtaba, be very important to eliminate him as well and remove him from the picture.

But otherwise, so far, we've seen Iranians on the streets. No consequences. But I – I'm very Jon, I just want to, you know, all of this optimistic assessment can be very, very cautious and careful because the Iranian regime still has a lot of fight in it. They still have thousands of missiles. They still have the guns. They are incredibly brutal. And the more they realize that they're facing an existential threat to their very survival, the more dangerous they'll become.

SCHANZER: Totally agree. And – and I think, you know, one of the things that I've heard is not just, you know, be wary of these missiles. And of course, we've seen what a direct strike looks like in Tel Aviv, and in other places around the Arab world, which maybe we can talk about in a minute. But I've also heard – and Mark, let me stay with you, and then we can get Rich to weigh in on this as well – the idea that maybe Donald Trump might say after, let's say, a couple of days, "We've just shown you what we're capable of doing. Now, negotiate with us as we had first asked you to – and you didn't do it in good faith. We now have punished you for it. But now get back to the table." And then we're still right back where we were in this sort of rope-a-dope thing, where the Iranians could fleece us at the table. Are you worried about that? I'm assuming you are.

DUBOWITZ: So – so Rich knows I worry all the time. We've been working together on Iran for 20 years. I'm – I'm sort of a Nervous Nelly when it comes to any time a US president, even Donald Trump, is sitting down with the Iranians negotiating. I have this joke. It's called the RAR Doctrine, which is Rich is Always Right. Because over 20 years, Rich has been always right. And Rich has assured me, particularly during the Trump administration, the president was not going to get pulled into some kind of rope-a-dope and some kind of negotiating process with this regime that would end up with a fatally flawed agreement.

But yeah, I remain worried. I remain worried that President Trump's exit from this after three, four, five, seven days of really weakening the Islamic Republic is to offer them, again, a chance to come back to the table after having pounded them and say, "Okay, I've made it clear now, on three occasions. I killed Soleimani. I dropped bombs on Fordow, and now I've launched strikes in February against your regime. I don't bluff. You have a choice. You can either do a deal with me or I can eliminate you." And in fact, he said that in his eight-minute video today. And he – he said to the IRGC, you know, "Lay down your weapons and we can talk. Otherwise, I'm going to kill you all." And I think at this point, the IRGC and the top Iranian leadership probably takes the president seriously.

SCHANZER: All right, so, Rich, you're apparently always right. So, what's your take on all this? Should we be worried? Are we going back to negotiations, or do you think Donald Trump sweeps the leg, so to speak, knocks these guys out and they never come back?

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GOLDBERG: So, two points. One, I agree with Mark in his note of caution that obviously the enemy always gets a vote. But I do I do differ in – in this belief. And that is, I think they already perceive this is an attempt to decapitate the regime, push them off, and replace them. Therefore, what they are doing now is the most they can do and will be in coming hours and days, the most that they can do because they are now fighting for their existence. And I think the president understands that. The Israelis understand that and we are acting accordingly. And so, having an understanding of the BDA [Battle Damage Assessment], updated assessments of what we think we've destroyed, what we think they have left, that will be important as time goes on to really measure what we think is going on.

We've seen volleys of ballistic missiles today. How many have been destroyed in that process? You know, so far, you know, you go through the first 24 hours not seeing the kind of casualty levels that some people out there believe would happen – World War III type stuff. What – you know, the propaganda the regime promised. Obviously, one missile gets through, and it changes the equation. But really understanding what is in their order of battle still is helpful to understand, at least, what we're estimating. Maybe that will not be declassified in time, but – but important to try to figure out the other piece here.

Listen, I watched the president's video that he released early this morning. I think he couldn't have been more clear. I think at the very least, he wants to get through this having decimated the various threats, the United States to the oil market, to – to our Gulf allies, to Israel, to the region, to the world. Right? So that could be Pickaxe Mountain and other nuclear sites at the top, plus whatever Israel's doing to the rest of the nuclear apparatus and scientists covertly. Whatever he can do to the missile program short range, medium range, and the ICBM program. You know, they – they call it SLV program, a Space Launch Vehicle program. whatever he can do to just annihilate the “navy” – I put that in air quotes, of course – and their ability to – to threaten swarms and, and shut down the street and things like that.

And then what the Israelis can do to continue to hunt down the remaining leadership that they have not gotten, knowing that you're not dealing with the A-team here, they're going to make a lot of mistakes. A lot is going on. And in that confusion, you're going to open yourself up to additional opportunities and new targets of opportunity like we saw with Hezbollah after that bunker strike. I think that will work to the advantage where the president has said, “This is the once in a generation opportunity for you, the people of Iran. We're not committing ground troops here. This is not an invasion. We are going to do historic things to this regime. You've already seen it started.” Nobody who's out there in opposition right now screaming for a vote on the War Powers Act, did – had any belief that in one second, we could just wipe out Ali Khamenei. Nobody believed that. And it just happened. So, there's a lot of incredible planning and coordination and intelligence work that has gone into this. And so, I think the president is not about to say, “Hey, looks good. BDA is going well for two days. Let's see what this guy wants to offer.” I think you're going to allow the Israelis to work over and hunt down many more people, really work on the apparatus of repression.

And if – and if people are not on the streets ready to gun down people and millions can get out and just start taking over government buildings, and you can look at that transition plan that Reza Pahlavi has and say, “Hey, this is workable. Let's put ministers in. Let's – let's take bureaucracies. Will people give their allegiance – people with guns – to somebody else who can take this technocratic into a different direction?” That's what the president is going to wait to see. I would imagine if that doesn't occur at some point, once he's achieved all the strategic objectives that are absolutely in the US interest, at that point, you think about what is your off ramp. But we're not there yet, and we have a lot of targets to go through in our strategic threats alone, and what the Israelis can accomplish in command and control. And – and hopefully there is a there is somebody – there are people ready to help the people on the ground come out and retake their country, as the president has called them to do.

DUBOWITZ: Yeah. Jon, can I just add something to that? Because I thought something happened a few days ago that was really interesting. And maybe Rich can also shed some light on this.

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So, the CIA came out and issued a X post in Farsi asking for Iranians to contact them and provided secure links. And I thought, well, that's interesting. I mean, I hadn't seen that from the CIA. And what I imagine is going on is that the Mossad and Aman – Israeli military intelligence – have been very successful in operating on the ground, not just during the 12-Day War, but during the latest round of protests. I think it's possible that Israeli intelligence came to Washington and presented their operational achievements and plans to the Americans, and the US reaction was, “Oh, wow, that's really impressive. That's really interesting.”

And either the president directed it or John Ratcliffe, CIA director, directed it. But the CIA was told, “All right, gentlemen, step up. It's time for you to work closely with Mossad and Aman, and let's start to provide serious support to the Iranian people on the ground. Let's really run a campaign of maximum fracturing, where we begin to fracture the elite support base of the regime, which held together quite well during the January protests. How do we flip the charlatans and the crooks and isolate the true believers?” And I think that that is interesting. There may be something going on behind the scenes that is not publicly apparent, but I don't think it was by accident that the CIA put that out.

SCHANZER: Alright, Rich, go ahead. Why don't you respond to that? And I got one more question before we wrap up.

GOLDBERG: Yeah, I just want to I want to add two points here. I think Mark's on to something here.

Number one, the president talked about immunity for members of the IRGC who laid down their weapons. Didn't necessarily say, “I'm going to go to the table and do a JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] with you.” He talked about immunity. I think that's an important thing to talk about. This is not going to be a de-Baathification campaign that collapses the infrastructure of the government of Iran, which would cause chaos in the country.

There is going to be the potential that those who do not have significant blood on their hands, who are not hardened, you know, loyalists of – of the regime, and the supreme leader, that you – you demonstrate there is a path for you to get through, to lay down your weapon and say, “I was in this regime, but I'm not going to do this anymore. I'm disgusted by what I saw happen in January to 32,000 people.” We should be talking about that.

We should also be talking about our willingness to relieve sanctions and start rolling them back and have a plan to do so, and let people know that their lives are going to improve incredibly, and they will be enriched at all levels of society because we have an opportunity now to see a regime – to see a government come in that actually meets the requirements for not having sanctions. Which is in our laws of not pursuing WMD, of not being a state sponsor of terrorism. And I think that's the first time in my entire career I've uttered those words. But I want that to be me who's saying it right now to the people of Iran, to know that that is the future and it's not far off.

DUBOWITZ: And we've been posting about here...

SCHANZER: ...What we're all talking about here, guys, is – is basically, you know, it's – it's a kind of a repeat of Venezuela to some extent. Right? The idea of taking out the top leadership and then finding pragmatists that you're able to still work with. It doesn't mean you love them, but you want to try to give the country a fresh start. Maybe with a gun to the head of the remaining leaders but letting them know that they have a choice – but really, not much of one at all.

GOLDBERG: Well, there's definitely a level, let's just say, that I don't think the Iranian people will – will tolerate being part of an immunity campaign. I don't know where the cutoff is. You need technocrats. You need people who actually run the government and the ministries. But there is some echelon that has so much blood on their hands that will need to face – face justice. And they may face justice from the Israeli military or Mossad in the next week or so anyways.

SCHANZER: Alright. We're running out of time here. I do want to give Mark a chance to respond here, because he looks like he had something he wanted to say. So, go ahead, Mark.

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DUBOWITZ: No, listen, I think Rich raised a profound point. I mean, FDD has spent the past 20 years imposing sanctions on the Islamic Republic. I mentioned, you know, working closely with Rich over many years when he was in the House or the Senate and the Trump administration, and the enormous work that was done to impose really severe and biting sanctions. I think those sanctions have been very effective. I think they triggered the protests in January. I think they've drained the regime of hundreds of billions of dollars of resources that they could have used to build nuclear weapons and missiles and fund their terror proxies.

But I think there's a real opportunity for FDD to lead the way in helping lift those sanctions.

SCHANZER: Yeah.

DUBOWITZ: And as Rich said – pretty, pretty surprising to hear that from both of us. But I think in the new Iran – and we've been out on X posting this – that we, as FDD, are going to lead the way in a new Iran, in a new government, and a free Iran, to get those sanctions lifted. To bring prosperity and freedom to the Iranian people and really establish a new Iran as a close American ally, a close Israeli ally. As they say, *Inshallah, B'Ezrat Hashem*. We can get there. But it could be a really profound transformation for American and Israeli national security.

SCHANZER: So let me just say, it is pretty remarkable here, you two guys talking about lifting sanctions on Iran on an FDD SITREP. This is not a day I ever imagined. But then again, I did not imagine today at all. I think a lot of us had a hard time imagining this.

I think before we get to the lifting of sanctions, the responsible lifting of sanctions, dare I say, we've got many more targets before we sleep. There's probably a lot of things that need to get hit. Probably a number of leaders that need to be removed. There are things that need to be worked out.

I understand there's a lot of optimism. I think we should call it guarded optimism. For now, we've got a lot of things that still need to fall into place. But for today, less than 24 hours into this war, the United States and Israel in tandem have done remarkable work. We've seen the removal of the top echelons of the regime. We have seen the neutralization of hundreds, maybe thousands of missiles, air defenses, all but gone. We expect total air superiority by tomorrow for everything that I'm hearing.

So, for everyone listening at home, we will be back for more SITREPs. We'll be bringing together more live programming like this.

I want to thank you for joining us tonight. Stay tuned for more updates from FDD. Thank you, Mark. Thank you, Rich. We'll see you all again tomorrow.

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