

FDD Media Call: Operation Epic Fury and the future of the Middle East

March 2, 2026

Featuring Jonathan Schanzer, RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and David Daoud

Moderated by Joe Dougherty

DOUGHERTY: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Joe Dougherty, Senior Director of Communications at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy. Thank you for joining us today as we discuss the latest developments on Operation Epic Fury, and I suspect we know who created that name.

There's a lot to unpack here, so I'm pleased to share that we have several outstanding experts on today's call. Jonathan Schanzer is FDD Executive Director and a Middle East scholar, an expert on US-Middle East relations. Schanzer is a frequent traveler to the region where he's met with senior leadership of many states there. He's the author of four books on Middle East security and is a former terrorism and finance analyst at the US Department of Treasury, where he followed and froze the funding of Hamas and Al-Qaeda, as well as other groups.

We have Rear Admiral (retired) Mark Montgomery as an FDD Senior Fellow and Senior Director of FDD Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation. Mark formerly served as a policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, where he coordinated efforts on national security strategy, force posture, capabilities, and cyber policy. Mark served 32 years in the US Navy. His flag officer assignments included Director of Operations at US Pacific Command, Commander of Carrier Strike Group Five, aboard the USS George Washington, and Deputy Director for Plans, Policy and Strategy at US European Command. And from '98 to 2000, Mark served at the National Security Council as Director for Transnational Threats.

Behnam Ben Taleblu is an FDD Senior Fellow and Senior Director of FDD's Iran Program, where he oversees the breadth and depth of FDD's work on Iran in addition to serving as a senior fellow specializing in Iranian security and political issues. He's a leading expert on Iran's domestic politics, the IRGC, and the Islamic Republic's military capabilities, in particular, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drone capabilities.

Lastly, we have David Daoud, Senior Fellow focused on Lebanon and Hezbollah. David holds a JD with a concentration in International Law and Laws of Armed Conflict and has spent extensive time living in the Middle East, primarily in Israel and Lebanon, and is fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew. He closely tracks Lebanon's domestic policy challenges and Hezbollah's leadership and military capabilities. So we have four outstanding experts on the key subject matters of the day.

Some quick housekeeping before we get started. Today's conversation is on the record. We will share the video of today's call probably within 45 minutes of the call's ending, hopefully sooner, and a transcript by sometime early tomorrow morning, if not tonight. We'll try and turn that around quickly for you. We will have Q&A after the opening of remarks. To ask a question, you can use the chat feature, and I'll be happy to read it aloud, or you can use the raise hand feature and you can ask the question yourself. We're moving quickly because there's a lot to address. Thanks for your patience. Jon, we'll get started with you. Over to you, please.

SCHANZER: All right. Thanks, Joe. A pleasure to be with everybody today. A couple of quick things that I thought I would flag, just some of the trends that I'm watching across the region right now that I think are notable, and I think you'll hear more from my colleagues momentarily on it. One is the US and Israel have now declared air superiority. This means that there are really no air defenses to speak of in the hands of the Islamic Republic. This means that the US and Israel are operating at will inside Iran, and they are hunting for their targets with the intelligence that they've been able to collect. This is the game changer. This has happened sooner than it did last time around during the 12-Day War when Israel did this on its own. The US obviously playing a significant role here.



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The second thing, and we've heard a lot about this, and I know that Behnam will talk about it and no one is better, this question of the Iranian people coming out against their regime. The risks of doing so right now, while the regime is still in power, I think are significant. I think we should not underestimate that. There are factions that I think we are all keeping an eye on. Certainly, we've seen the Reza Pahlavi crowd and their intent to have some role in the aftermath of what is being touted as the potential downfall of the regime. We're seeing the MEK, the Mojahedin-e-Khalq, come out in larger numbers than I think anybody had expected here in the United States and elsewhere, trying to influence what may come after. Then there's, of course, the assets of the CIA and the Mossad. And then there's just the rank and file organic Iranian people that truly detest their regime. And I think it remains to be seen exactly what the dynamic will look like when it's all said and done, but this is obviously a crucial component of whatever comes next.

A third trend I'm watching, and you'll hear from David Daoud about this — the proxies. Specifically, it's a big day in Lebanon today. Yes, there was an attack against Israel of three missiles, and they were all intercepted. But really, what happened after, I think, is what is more important to watch. The Israelis took out the head of intelligence for Hezbollah. Then that was followed by the declaration that they would soon take out Naim Qassem, the secretary general of Hezbollah. There have been now calls by the IDF to clear out villages across Lebanon. They've actually called for the evacuation of Dahiya, which is the stronghold of Hezbollah in Beirut.

There's been a lot of movement here, but I think maybe the most important thing of all is the potential for the Israelis, even as they've carried out strikes across Lebanon today to take out the financial nodes of Hezbollah Al-Qard al-Hasan as it's known, and I hope David will speak about that for just a bit. But there's a lot happening, and the government of Lebanon is now speaking with a lot more bravery, maybe for the first time, about removing Hezbollah permanently, or at least completely neutering its military capabilities.

A couple of other things that I'll flag before I hop off here. I am looking for the total numbers of missiles and missile launchers. This is important because there were thousands of missiles in Iran's arsenal at the start of this conflict, but the fewer missile launchers there are, and Behnam can talk a bit about the difference of the kinds of missiles that they have in their arsenal, but the fewer launchers, the fewer rounds they're going to be able to squeeze off. And so the chaos that we're watching around the region as Arab states and Israelis and Americans are hit, that will go down as the launcher number is reduced, even if there are thousands of missiles still remaining.

Another big question I think that has yet to be answered and maybe will never be answered is that the amount of missile defense in the region. One of the most closely guarded secrets in Israel is how many Arrow 3 interceptors they have at their disposal, those that can shoot down ballistic missiles. We don't have a clear indication right now, and I don't think we're going to get one, but the United States has deployed a huge amount of missile defense into the region. It's not hermetic, and I expect Mark Montgomery will talk about that in his remarks, just what we're doing to try to keep a pretty nervous coalition of Arab states that are definitely not impervious to these missile strikes. You know, what are we doing there?

And then, I think for me, I'm keeping an eye on all talk of diplomacy. I think all of us here are all for talking about solutions to the conflict if there are people that are serious on the other side of the table. I'm worried that the regime may try to dangle diplomacy as an off-ramp for the war without making any real concessions. At least for right now, it does not look like Donald Trump is interested in having those discussions. And I think there are a lot of people in the region, probably first and foremost the Iranian people, who are not interested in dangling a lifeline to this regime and I am definitely hopeful that we'll hear from Behnam about that.

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Finally, I do want to note that we have seen impact of this war on the US military. This is, of course, to be expected, doesn't make it any less sad or difficult to absorb. And I do hope that Mark will talk about this. We've lost at least three service members that I'm aware of, and there have been, I think, five injuries in one incident. And then there was another attack on Bahrain today where two Department of War employees were also reportedly injured. There's a lot happening here right now that could impact the will of the American people. Debates, we've not exactly been cohesive in our political debates as it relates to Iran or really anything else for that matter. So I'm watching this very carefully, a spike in the price of oil as a result of attacks on the Aramco facility and others around the region also could have ripple effects here in the United States.

So these are some of the trends that I'm watching and that we're watching here at FDD. Highly dynamic situation, more to come. I'm going to have to hop off in just a few minutes, but I want to hand things back over to my capable colleague, Joe Dougherty, who will direct traffic with my other colleagues who've got much more important things to say than what I've relayed so far.

DOUGHERTY: Jon, thanks for setting the table for us. Very much appreciated. We're going to move over now to Mark Montgomery to give us a lay of the land on the military situation.

MONTGOMERY: Yeah, thanks, Joe. Look, I look at three things, I was going to take away: one was US objectives; the other was very specific about the Strait of Hormuz; and third was about munitions. On the US objectives, I think if done properly, I'd said a four-week strike effort, maybe listening to Dan Caine today, four to six week — I mean, that would be the optimum strike effort across 200 US Air Force and Navy aircraft and 200 Israeli aircraft supplemented by strategic bombers for the United States. They could work across the six lines of effort that you kind of hear consistently said: one's IRGC leadership and facilities; the second suppression of enemy air defense — and I think that one may be getting near consummation, like being complete; third is the nuclear program, despite our previous obliteration efforts, I think there's probably some reattack required there; four is, and this is the one that I think is getting the highest level of concentration right now, it's ballistic missile assets, facilities, and production — so assets and facilities right now to knock down the threat to US forces in the Arabian Peninsula and to Israel, but then long-term production — the thing that we missed, I think during the 12-Day War, Israel would've liked to have gone a little bit longer and really worked the production lines over; fifth is drone assets, facilities and production as well, and again, for the same reason to protect our forces in the Arabian Peninsula and some help for Israel, although I don't think drones get all the way to Israel when they're eviscerated by US Air Force and then Israeli Air Force aircraft; and then finally, naval capabilities.

And I think the president is right to prepare the US public that this is going to require significant US and Israeli strike assets, and maybe we'll be joined in by other partners. I think the UAE is probably inching closer to that kind of decision. And we're going to continue to receive retaliatory strikes from Iran until we've knocked those systems completely offline. So, again, I think if we were doing 500 or 600 strikes today, I would say a plurality or majority are headed at that, at the ballistic and missile and drone existing facilities.

We can't take our foot off the gas here. The one thing that really concerns me is the president looking to off-ramp this like he off-ramped the 12-Day War too early. So that's how I kind of look at the objectives and pretty straightforward. And I was impressed with the day-one strikes. That was pretty good. Also, it's a reminder to us. I just came back from three weeks in Ukraine where there's a completely different kind of war fighting going on. There's some similarities with drones and counter drones, but let's be clear, this was a lot of high-end ass butt-kicking. So this is a slightly different war. And this reminds us that when we fight, if we had to fight an adversary like China, you're going to need a little bit of both. The hellscapes, Ukraine stuff on the East Coast, and then this high-end stuff on the West Coast, the hellscapes and the high-end stuff on the East side.

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The second big issue is the Strait of Hormuz mining. Look, I'm not sure if their entire Navy was destroyed. I hope so. I helped sink some of those ships 40 years ago. I have over the last 30 years come to despise almost all the Iranian ship COs. They're vicious people who mistreat merchant mariners badly, and I hope they're on board their ships when they were hit, but I'm not sure they're all destroyed. But even if they were, the Iranians could still mine the Gulf. They can use non-standard ships. And in fact, they did so in the 1980s when a civilian cargo vessel was used for mining. So we really need to rubblize all the Navy storage, logistics, and command-and-control facilities, and be on the lookout for anything getting underway.

I mean, me and Joe could grab a bog hammer and do a tiny bit of mining, just enough to get people worked up. And here's what I say about mining. A few mines in there, and you're going to get that Joint War Council [Committee], the maritime insurers run out of... it's in London. If it says, "Hey, this is a listed area," then you're really going to see a pullback of any legitimate merchant flow through the strait. So we have to be very careful about that. And finally, they still have anti-ship cruise missiles and drones that can threaten tankers and they are hitting tankers. So that's a serious issue.

The third thing I want to talk about, so first one was the kind of objective, second with Strait of Hormuz mining, and third's munitions. Look, on the offensive side, if I say four to six weeks, this is not going to be a problem. Do I think there's unique high-end things that we might get low on over... Yes, we could run out of some very specific ones, but the really good weapons system here, the JASSM-ER the JDAM, we've been building these like a drunken sailor for the last decade. So I'm feeling pretty comfortable that our munitions will be okay, the Israeli munitions will be okay on the offensive side. I would lay off of Tomahawks at this point. They served their purpose in those early days when you're trying to minimize threats to aircraft that — there is an exquisite every once in a while version that you'd want to use it for, then I'd go ahead and use Tomahawks for an exquisite mission. But generally speaking, I think that we're moving on here to air to ground.

The munitions issue that does worry is the one that Jon Schanzer referred to, and that's defensive munitions. You're talking about, these are the things that worry me. Patriot and THAAD, we know that they've been low in the past. We know that the production is now being ramped up to be better in 2027, not right now. So Patriots, THAADs, Arrows. I'd also mention SM-3s on the destroyers protecting Israel in the Strait of Hormuz probably. We fired quite a few of them last year in two different engagements, and that was something we were kind of ramping down the line on for a while. We picked it back up all of a sudden, but numbers, that's probably a sporty number.

Where we're okay is the anti-ship, the weapons to defend the ships at sea, those air defense ones, that's a core capability of the Navy, so they have that. They shot a lot of them in the Red Sea, but they bought a lot last year, so I think they're okay there. So I think that's okay. But the munitions that worry me are those other ones. So clearly the goal here, what you don't want to do is to do what you're watching the Ukrainians do, which is using their Patriot to defend less, the defended area that they're using it for is less and less, because that means more weapons are hitting and there's more chance for forces that are dug in to still get around and get a lot of injured and potentially dead. So that's something we really strongly have to work on.

And I don't worry about Iron Dome. I think the Israelis are pretty good on that number too. So those defensive munitions could be our Achilles heel. So the more we hammer... That just goes back to my line of effort discussion. Prioritize ballistic missile, drone, and drone facilities, stowage, existing assets in the field so you can minimize the number coming at you. So those are the kind of three big issues I'm looking at and trying to get my hands around.

Joe, back to you.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Mark. I really appreciate your insight there. Let's move over to specifically Iran and the various factors there.

Over to you, Benham.



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BEN TALEBLU: Thanks, Joe. Greetings everyone. Great to follow Mark just right now on some of those military rationales. I want to discuss as briefly, but hopefully as relevantly as I can, five specific areas: the president; Iran's targeting strategy for the GCC; Iran's targeting strategy for Israel; the people inside Iran; and obviously the regime. Okay, and what could come next, what's happening now?

Just the president. America has had a lot of military wins in the Middle East the past two decades. We haven't had a lot of political wins, and the president is rightly skeptical about that. The way the joint Israeli-American mission looks today is that at a minimum, it looks like a decapitation plus a defanging mission. And there, a military win can be framed as a political win, meaning you've killed the commander-in-chief of the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism. You've gutted the regime of senior military intelligence officials, and you have significantly neutered or trimmed down long-range strike capabilities, that full spectrum of unmanned aerial threats that Mark just mentioned.

But how to translate that into a political win, and especially marry that with the political commentary from the US president or the Israeli prime minister, aka, how to use air power to drive regime change, something which the track record for isn't really that good anywhere around the globe, particularly sans ground power. So to that end, just for folks who are interested as to what the rationale could be, I had a piece very early Friday morning in Foreign Affairs that you may be interested in that talks about the rationale of military force being not just decapitation or defanging, but then moving from that mission, if it is successfully accomplished, to a lower, slower, more of a campaign against the regime's security forces, because otherwise encouraging the people to come out again without doing anything about that internal balance is basically suicide. So the goal should be to actually pave the pathway to flip the script on the ayatollahs and actually develop an ally and a partner in this part of the world. And I believe we do have that in the Iranian people and we'll get back to the Iranian people.

But just in terms of the president and his articulation, as you know, he's talked about the Venezuela option before. I don't believe such a thing exists with respect to Iran, but his two speeches on Saturday and on Sunday, if I'm not mistaken, both did allude to the Iranian people. And thus far, unlike the mixed messaging between the Israeli prime minister and the US president that we saw during the 12-Day War, here there's been quite a good amount of message discipline. And in particular, the president said, "Stay home." No one goes out to protest during the middle of a massive aerial bombardment anyway, but he said to stay home. Obviously, the Iranian people only turned out hours later because they were felicitating and celebrating the death of the longest serving autocrat in the Middle East, Ali Khamenei.

So that does give room for cautious optimism for people who believe there can be a contagion effect after a US military win in the region. We simply need a strategy for it. The president has been thus far silent on what the strategy that could be to help drive the next round of street protests rather than to pull back, in which case that would dampen them.

With respect to the targeting formula and the targeting strategy of the Islamic Republic, yes, it is still in position of the region's biggest ballistic missile arsenal and the region's biggest drone arsenal, but a fundamentally different strategy towards Israel and towards the GCC.

First, towards the GCC, some of you have been shocked to see the videos and imagery coming out of the area in the weekend; luxury hotels, residences, ports, civilian airports in at least three or four countries, energy facilities just earlier today, a US flagged vessel for instance. This is a widening war, a widening war of choice by the Islamic Republic that is replicating the mistake in the conflict that Mark previously mentioned, which is the Iran-Iraq war.

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Despite Saddam being the first one to target energy during the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic then mistakenly believed it could internationalize the crisis and therefore get pressure off of it and go after Saddam's backers that started to target Kuwaiti and Saudi shipping. Here again, the Islamic Republic is making the same mistake. It thinks they can internationalize the conflict, create a cycle that plays to the restraint element in America, that plays to the fear elements in the region, and thus deter a larger, wider, more dangerous war, save its missiles, save its leadership, and save the regime.

In fact, the exact opposite seems to be the case. The US and Israel seemed to be resolutely pursuing the defanging mission against the regime's long range strike capabilities. The GCC is actually moving closer to the Americans. If I had to think of a bumper sticker for the Abraham Accords, I couldn't think of a better one than a persistent Iranian drone and missile campaign against the GCC. And it's actually even got the Europeans interested as well. The UK reportedly said that they would allow the US to use some of its spaces in the region to complete this defanging mission against the Islamic Republic's missile capabilities. And the reason I say there's a difference in the targeting formula and the strategy of Iran against the GCC is because it's been largely drone-led. Yes, part of that has to do with distance and cost and range, but another reason that the Islamic Republic is pursuing drones is yet to also save and shepherd and conserve most of its own arsenal, in particular, stuff that it might use later at US bases of the region or to continue in different phases of the missile war against America.

So consider what you're seeing in the Persian Gulf and some of the GCC countries there quite literally aerial terrorism by drone. We saw this during the 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras attacks, but now we're seeing it against a more diversified set of civilian targets and one that seems to be stiffening the resolve of our GCC partners.

And just by way of parallel, I mentioned the Iran-Iraq war, Mark mentioned the Iran-Iraq war. The Iran-Iraq war is also the last time when an Arab country in this part of the world shot Iranian jets out of the sky. I believe reportedly earlier today, we had the Qataris actually fire at two Iranian planes just I think about 10 or 12 hours ago. So it's worth seeing how history has kind of repeated itself there.

With respect to targeting formula in Israel, it is precisely designed to replicate the successes in the later phases of the 12-Day War, not the first phases. So while traditionally we tend to think about Iranian missiles as having a quantitative advantage rather than a qualitative advantage, particularly against Israel's very well-layered air and missile defense architecture, which is absolutely the best in terms of states there in that part of the world, make no mistake, the Iranian success came late in the war because they actually forced the Israelis to burn through significant stocks of missile defenses that did intercepts in the terminal phase, and that actually allowed them to land, unfortunately, quite a few blows at civilian infrastructure, hospitals, schools, housing complexes in the latter part of the 12-Day War. Particularly some of you may remember the targeting in Beersheba and also the penetrating of some civilian bunkers. I think a two- or three-level bunker, killing, I think, two or three people as well.

So that is the Iranian targeting formula here rather than to go all in to shepherd these resources knowing full well that its chain of Western bases, which are largely subterranean, are going to be what the US or Israel is focusing on. that the US seems to be focusing on. But the goal with Israel is to shepherd them so that it can land some of these countervalue blows. Pardon me for copying the phrase from nuclear world. Countervalue blows to try to damage the civilian morale and will to carry out the fight. So Iran's missiles, despite being tools of coercion, deterrence and punishment in both these cases are designed to still be tools of terror to erode the will to fight over time and play to our image, and particularly our partners' image of what a longer and more protracted war could look like.

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Lastly, with respect to the people, we talked about protestor resolve and the Iranian people kind of shepherding and waiting for the moment for them to come out again. I would also just say that it is still, in my view, a matter of when, not if the people do come out again. There is more connectivity right now than I've ever seen in the past 47 years between internal dissidents and protestors and external opposition.

I would say Jon mentioned some cleavages and factors within the Iranian opposition. I would say Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi is leaps and bounds more popular than anything else that Jon had mentioned there. And Washington, in my view, should not be making perfect the enemy of the good when it actually comes to options in this part of the world.

And then lastly, I want to end with something on the regime. Some of you may be seeing news of a leadership council emerge that is exactly what is called for within the Iranian Constitution. Although if there ever is a rule in Iran, the rule is to simply ignore the rules. These are a system run by men, not by laws. And while there is still this leadership council created that has the president, Pezeshkian, the head of the judiciary, Eje'i, and this clerics who some of you may know or not know Mr. Arafai, specifically Ayatollah Alireza Arafai, he's basically another hardline cleric, not too vocal, although every time he has spoken, he said all the wrong things. Many believe he could be a placeholder for another deep state bureaucrat or for a potential interim supreme leader individual.

But the focus in the West on this leadership council and on Arafai obscures the fact that after the decapitation strike against Iran Supreme Leader Khamenei, that the most important person in Iran today is Ali Larijani. And the most important security institution in Iran today is the institution that Larijani leads, which is the Supreme National Security Council. If Washington wants to actually gut command and control, the Supreme National Security Council, its secretariat, its staff, and its secretary, Mr. Larijani, are probably going to be coming within the target set of either the Israelis or the Americans. And here, of course, the fact that he hasn't said anything in the past few days, and the fact that the regime is still able to fire missiles and drones, sans the commander-in-chief, speaks volumes.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Benham. David, before we get to you, we've got Laura Kelly at the Hill. She's on tight deadline.

Speaking of Larijani, Laura asks about what can he say about his reputation, how powerful he is among surviving officials, is he emerging as a top figure with the ability to negotiate with the US. And your colleague, Greg Takei over at CFR, Laura says, describes him as "One of the greatest scumbags," and the "LeBron James of lying." I don't know what to say to that, but apparently that's in quotes too. So thoughts on Larijani?

BEN TALEBLU: I'll be brief. I know Daoud's in the wings. Ray may play basketball, but I play backgammon, so it's a different world of analogies.

Larjani, along with actually Rohani, are two people that I would float where if you had to say, what is Iran's version of a deep state national security bureaucrat or what is Iran's version under the Islamic Republic of a "swamp" creature? It would be the likes of those two individuals. They've worked with Iran's various factions. They're trusted by some of the most hardline elements. They've been pushed back by some of the most hard line elements. But they've also come back and been invited back by some of the most hardline elements. Then in some way, they're more dangerous actually because they're more capable. It doesn't mean they're not ideological, but it means that an ideological person who has an ideological end state is actually clinically and rationally able to pursue that end state with greater capability.

And so someone like Larjani might be the one pushing the system or what's left of the system to offer negotiations, but someone like Larjani also has no problem continuing the war of attrition against Israel, our posture in the region, as well as against our partners in the GCC. So Larjani is absolutely, in my view, at this moment in time, the most important national security person in the Islamic Republic and the institution that he leads is the most important institution in the Islamic Republic.

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DOUGHERTY: Copy. For those that arrived a few minutes late to the call today, we will have a video sent out to you roughly about 30 minutes to 45 minutes after the call concludes. We'll also have a transcript to you aiming for late tonight or first thing tomorrow morning.

But now it's time to move over to David Daoud to talk about Hezbollah, and that has jumped into the news suddenly overnight, David. Over to you, please.

DAOUD: Thank you, Joe. So I'm going to take us back to the couple of years almost now to the November 27th, 2024 ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, but ended the last round of fighting between the Israelis and the Lebanese, sorry, between the Israelis and Hezbollah. And at the time and consistently since then, I've called this ceasefire premature and a mistake. I think we're seeing this in effect right now, and I'll go through the reasons why.

First of all, the assumption that prevails in Washington, the erroneous assumption, is that Hezbollah's strength in Lebanon stems purely from its arsenal, purely from its military strength. This is why so many people celebrated the ceasefire or the ceasefire agreement as a momentous achievement because of the assumption is that Hezbollah is a tyrannical external entity to Lebanon that holds the country hostage through the grip of its arms and the degradation that Hezbollah suffered at the hands of the Israelis over the course of the year plus since October 8th of 2023 when Hezbollah joined the war should have allowed Lebanon to, as so many have said since then, the phrase, "retake their country, throw off the shackles of Hezbollah" because the only barrier — Hezbollah's arsenal — had been severely degraded, except there were two other factors that this narrative never took into consideration.

The first is there is a genuine fear barrier. And the majority of Lebanese, as far as we can tell, something like 63% to 70% according to polls since November 27th, 2024, don't want Hezbollah to remain armed. At the same time, they don't want to do anything to achieve that goal, to disarm Hezbollah. There was a fear barrier that unfortunately had not been broken yet when the ceasefire went into effect that Hezbollah had been sufficiently militarily degraded, that if the Lebanese state or its military apparatuses, security apparatuses decided to move against Hezbollah, that this would not lead into Civil War.

And why would this lead into Civil War? This stems from the second factor that was ignored, not taken into consideration, which Hezbollah has tried to emphasize over the course of the past year and few months. And that is that Hezbollah's power in Lebanon truly stems from the popular support it receives from Lebanese Shiites.

What we've seen over the past year polling right before the ceasefire went into effect is something that 85% of Lebanese Shiites, to some degree or another, supported Hezbollah. Now, this was in line with the 2022, the May 2022, parliamentary results, which showed that Hezbollah had the largest block of popular support during that election with consistent polling throughout the war. And with several milestones, right? This was reinforced by several milestones after the ceasefire through which Hezbollah had sought to demonstrate that it retained the support of Shiites, including the day after the ceasefire went into effect. You had supporters of Hezbollah go back into the villages, chanting slogans in support of Hezbollah, waving the movement's banner. There was a vigil that was held at the place of the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, but the culmination really was the funeral of Hassan Nasrallah, which occurred about a year and a week ago, February 23rd, 2025, during which Hezbollah drew, according to Information International, this is a Lebanese consultancy group, something like 690,000 at minimum, to 900,000 people to demonstrate their grief over Nasrallah's passing. This was a critical milestone for Hezbollah, in an attempt to demonstrate to the Lebanese state that they were still a legitimate part of Lebanon to deter Lebanon. This is the critical factor that has historically deterred Lebanon from moving against Hezbollah. Because the assumption is that, okay, well, if Hezbollah is able to position itself as the guardian of the Shiites against external threats, against the guarantor of their equality internally, then moving against Hezbollah will be perceived as a move against the Shiite community, and therefore will precipitate civil war.

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So what we've seen since then as a result, despite the seemingly promising election of President Aoun, and the equally seemingly promising appointment of the Nawaf Salam government, which have issued a lot of promising rhetoric since then, is that the Lebanese state has not acted against Hezbollah in any meaningful way. On September 5th of 2025, despite promises to adopt the LAF plan to disarm Hezbollah, by the end of the year, the government ambiguously welcomed the plan, shifted the timeline from total disarmament of Hezbollah by the end of the year, to disarmament in the South Litani area only by the end of the year, and opted to do so through what was called containment. Rather than disarmament, they shifted to a policy of containment. This idea that rather than go and take Hezbollah's arms, they would simply surround its arsenal in certain areas and wait for time to do what Israel had failed to do up to the November 27th, 2024 ceasefire.

So this has allowed Hezbollah for its own admission to continue regenerating. And obviously, we can't take Hezbollah's statements at face value. This is an organization that will never admit defeat, will never admit surrender.

But then you have correlating factors that lend credence to Hezbollah's assertions, namely Israel's ongoing strikes in Lebanon, which I've documented in detail over the past year for Long War Journal, I put a weekly tracker showing exactly what the Israelis are hitting in Lebanon, who they're killing. And increasingly, the Israelis, especially since mid-2025, said they were targeting and killing Hezbollah operatives that were involved in the organization's regeneration efforts. This continued, by the way, after the LAF declared taking operational control over the South Litani area on January 8th of 2026. You'll notice in those trackers, the Israelis have still continued to kill Hezbollah operatives in those areas involved in local regeneration. So to the South of the Litani River.

The launch yesterday that brought Lebanon back into the ambit of the war also occurred south of the Litani River. So the Lebanese state, rather than confront Hezbollah head on, has engaged in the historical prevarication on disarmament because the factors that would allow them to meaningfully move against Hezbollah, had not come into place yet. Now, things may change with this war.

First of all, it's obvious that the Israelis are going to pursue the degradation of Hezbollah in a much more intense fashion than even in the previous round of conflict. I've been putting together a tracker already of the Israeli strikes in Lebanon. They're more numerous than anything I've seen even during the last conflict. They're targeting Hezbollah's assets throughout the country. And critically, they're going after Al-Qard al-Hasan, as Jon mentioned earlier. Al-Qard al-Hasan is Hezbollah's quasi-official financial institution, small loans entity. And why this is critical is, again, going to the Shiite factor. So Lebanese Shiites — Hezbollah brought the previous war upon them on October 8th of 2023 amidst a total collapse of the Lebanese economy. It compounded economic misery with a foreign war. Now, it was able to retain their support barely, or at least they're quiet after the November 27th, 2024 ceasefire by trying to rebuild, by bringing in money, by using stop-gap measures to help them reconstitute their lives to some degree in the villages that were evacuated or [inaudible].

Sorry. Don't know what that was. So they've barely been able to reconstitute their lives in the shadow of the ceasefire, and now Hezbollah has dragged them into another war that's not their own, a totally avoidable war. While they have their reasons for supporting the group, their patience is not unlimited. So when this war ends, what the Israelis are preparing for by the strikes of Al-Qard al-Hasan, is to make sure that Hezbollah doesn't have the means to continue retaining their support, to placate their anger, to keep them quiet and quiescent through payouts and money. This is a critical factor that may change the Lebanese calculus.

And we're starting to see it change with the declaration that the government put out today stating that for the first time, this is the first unambiguous statement on the matter that the Lebanese government has put out over the past year, or really in its history, prescribing all of Hezbollah's military and security activities.

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This is unprecedented. It's still rhetorical, and it still has a lot of caveats. If we look at the statement, this has not been translated into effective law, that prescribes Hezbollah as a criminal or terrorist organization in line with, say, the Taif Agreements requirement that all militias disarm after the Lebanese Civil Wars, is long overdue. Beyond that, LAF action has... While the government has ordered the LAF to move into the action to continue disarming Hezbollah, there are two caveats here. First, the LAF has not started to act yet. And I do worry that the Lebanese government will fall back on its old excuses that it has used over the past year to say that, well, the LAF lacks the capabilities, or that the LAF is going to be incapable of moving against Hezbollah so long as Israeli military operations are proceeding. If the statement is to have any meaning, the LAF needs to move against Hezbollah now.

The second part of it is that the order to the LAF is only to move against Hezbollah in the North Litani area. So the second phase that allegedly went into effect on February 16th of 2026 to disarm Hezbollah between the Litani and the Awali Rivers. The problem here is that this is maintaining the fiction that the Lebanese state has put forward on January 8th of 2026 that Hezbollah has been cleared from the South Litani area, as we've discussed. That's simply not the case. So we're seeing a rhetorical shift, but it's not yet a meaningful shift.

What we can expect though is that the Israelis are not going to let up. As this call started, the Israelis issued new evacuation orders to residents of Zibqin in South Lebanon, because they were intending on conducting strikes. These strikes have been nonstop, like I said, more intense than anything that I've seen even during the last war. And we can assume that there are going to be targeted killings of Hezbollah personnel to leave the group rudderless and leaderless. I think going after Naim Qassem or putting Naim Qassem in the target bank is especially important. This is a figure that has been underestimated, if you ask me, historically and since he assumed the role of Secretary General of Hezbollah after Nasrallah's death.

There have been reports that the Israelis over the past year, and this is part of the problem that led us to where we are, the Israelis were underestimating Naim Qassem, and celebrating the fact that he had become the secretary general because he lacked the charisma and personality of Hassan Nasrallah. However, it seems that what Hezbollah needed during the past year to fly under the radar, to not rock the boat, was specifically a person who did not have Nasrallah's baggage of dragging Lebanon into several wars on its own, both the 2006 conflict, the Syria conflict and the October 8th, 2023 conflict with Israel, and he's a nerd. He's quiet. This is the person that is underestimated by everyone. And I think this is exactly what Hezbollah needed over the past year to be underestimated, so it could proceed with the slow and steady business of regeneration.

So the fact that the Israelis are putting him within their target bank suggests to me that they're also correcting the course of the mistakes that they made over the past year, and not leaving any chances for Hezbollah to have the raw material to begin reconstituting if another ceasefire goes into effect, where Hezbollah still has some remnant of its forces. They're not betting on the Lebanese state this time around to do anything, or to do much. And this, I think, is crucial because, like I said, we've not yet seen, we've seen a very important statement from the Lebanese government, but it still remains words. If the Lebanese government is serious about acting, the time is going to be now and not after a ceasefire, not after some guarantees of continued aid to LAF or so on and so forth. And the Israelis seem to be not taking any chances on Beirut anymore. So this is going to be a game changer if and when the dust settles on this new round of fighting between Israel.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, David. Thank you, Behnam. Thank you, Mark. We do have some questions in the Q&A section. Just a quick reminder, you can put your question into the chat feature and I'll read it aloud, or raise your hand and we'll call on you and you can ask your question directly. We do have a couple questions from Sasha. I'm going to ask them both. One is to Mark: "How long do you think this war will go on for, if you had to take an educated guess?" And for Behnam: "What role has the Iranian Army played in this as opposed to the IRGC? Mark, you first."

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MONTGOMERY: So I'll answer, if in the world where Donald Trump was not President, I would say four to six weeks. But in a world where Donald Trump is President, when he gets out of bed and says, "I'm done with this war or I can get some other deal." So I'm a little worried about that. In fact, if I were to say that my biggest concern towards risk to mission is an early cessation caused by some belief from Steve Witkoff or the president that they could get the right deal, that would worry me. One of the thing that's hard to predict is, look, air-only campaigns have been successful when the US is involved in them, have been initially successful twice that I can think of: 2011 in Libya, I was at US European Command in that, but we had a very aggressive weaponized resistance force on the ground in Libya; and the second one is Kosovo in 1999, where again, we had a very aggressive weaponized KLA on the ground.

That does not describe the current condition in Iran. Were that to change, were there to be a different opposition, then this war could go on longer as you support them as they do things. But without that, Joe, I think it's four to six weeks, and I really, really hope it's four to six weeks so that the start of the next time we have to do this, there aren't immediately ballistic missiles and drones coming right back at us.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Mark. Behnam. You're muted.

BEN TALEBLU: Would you mind reiterating the question one more time?

DOUGHERTY: Happy to do so. One sec. What role has the Iranian army played in this as opposed to the IRGC?

BEN TALEBLU: Yes. So quite hard to tell because the Artesh, the national military is not my father or your grandfather's Artesh, the classic 1950s, 60s, 70s, US MAG mission, military assistance Artesh. The IRGC was created because Khomeini said, quote, "The Artesh has the Shah in its blood." So despite the size of the Artesh being larger, there has been literally a political ideological commissar, an office that is designed to indoctrinate newer generations of Artesh volunteers. But nonetheless, it is still believed to be the more nationalistic, the more patriotic, the more professionally trained force. There are at least 400,000, but they don't have the money or the equipment or the resources that the IRGC has had over the past three and a half decades, following the Iran-Iraq war.

Ultimately, Artesh targets were struck by the Israelis in previous rounds of Israel-Iran missile exchanges. It's hard to segment out exactly what the Artesh is or isn't doing, but largely they are not the ones in charge of the medium- range or short-range ballistic missiles. Those are the exclusive purview of the IRGC Aerospace Force, later on close range ballistic missile, the IRGC Ground Force. The Artesh does have some spin-stabilized rockets that are now guided, but they pale in comparison. I think it would be a mistake to target the Artesh. These would be the forces that I would want with immense respect contrary to Mark, doing the defecting, doing some of the fighting on the ground. I wouldn't want an insurgency. We neither proved that we could do that on the pro-American side by creating an army out of thin air in somewhere like Syria or in Afghanistan, given our mixed experience of intervention there.

So you want what's left of this force to kind of be offside. The question is how much of it realistically can it be offside if we have to continue with suppression and destruction of enemy air defense? I think the Artesh simply will get caught up in this business, but in terms of patriotism and size has just about enough forces to be irrelevant here up until you get to a state collapse scenario.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, Behnam. We have a question from Lena Argeri. "Everybody seems to be talking today about what the President said and what the Secretary of War alluded to, the possibility of ground troops. How likely and realistic is something like that in your opinion?" Let's start with Mark on that one.

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MONTGOMERY: I have to believe zero... Let me break this up. There are ground troops that aren't ground troops. Title 50 forces from the intelligence community, some Title X that fend for themselves. Those guys may, from both the US and Israeli side — may exist, and may have to be utilized for one thing or another. But in terms of traditional US ground forces, I think there's zero degrees Kelvin chance of that. And I hate to be... I'll eat it if I'm wrong, but that absolutely strikes me as not in President Trump's bingo card anywhere, and it's certainly not in any MAGA bingo card. So I think that's a very unlikely... And by the way, I would recommend heavily against it. I just think that's one way to not help the protestors long-term. If they need to be weaponized, they need to be weaponized by Title 50 forces.

DOUGHERTY: Mark, moderator privilege question: You've done a lot of military planning over the years in various scenarios. What are your thoughts on what the US and Israel did in the opening hours and day?

MONTGOMERY: So this is very impressive, and not to personalize it too much, but I worked at US European Command as Head of US-Israeli political military planning and military planning for three years. And if you had told me when I was working there that we would've evolved to this level... And by the way, the biggest impediment being the Israelis, I would've said this could not happen, but it has happened. Now look, this isn't integrated like the way we fly with maybe the United Kingdom where we could practically change wing men, but it's pretty well integrated. And I think we're doing a fantastic job, good intel sharing. We're calling it combined operations, but it's combined operations at the highest level. And a 900 strike first night with the vast majority being air, that is highly integrated, that's effective. And look, the density of the air space is, it's reflected in the Kuwaiti, I'm guessing, Patriot, I don't know that for a fact, shutdown of the three F-15s, reflects just how dense the airspace is with all this going on.

So I'm extremely impressed with the execution of it, but not surprised. I mean, we are world-class. If you call us to a street corner two to three months from now for a fight, we tend to be pretty good when we show up. So not surprised, but impressed.

DOUGHERTY: Benham, regarding the Iranian people, I heard you mention in a separate interview that nothing is going to happen while bombs are falling. Can you elaborate a bit on that and what your conversations with the diaspora here and your conversations with folks in Iran, what you're learning, what you could say?

BEN TALEBLU: Sure. Just very briefly, because the bulk, the heavy lift of the military mission, and Mark also laid this out, is decapitation plus defanging, those are not operations that inspire protests to resolve. Yes, perhaps if there's something spectacular, but already there was something spectacular and that was the killing of Khamenei. Now, Iranians are quite brave because they just lost 30 to 40,000 people in January and less than four, four and a half weeks later, they're out across six different university campuses across, I think, three or four major urban centers basically taking back those campuses. I don't know if I would have the guts to go out and protest on a university campus after 30 to 40,000 of my compatriots were slaughtered in about a two-day period by the central government.

But nonetheless, when you do have a major bombing mission, the MO of a population which has neither experienced in their young life and Iran, it's a young country in terms of the average demographic of the Iranian protestor, they haven't experienced a major kinetic conflict on their territory minus the 12-Day War. They haven't experienced a major revolution that succeeded the 1979 revolution. They haven't experienced the conflict minus the Iran-Iraq war. And they haven't actually seen insurgency revolution like much of the post-Arab Spring or post-global war on terror Middle East has.

So for that reason, the normal human incentive is to run, hide, and take cover. And unlike Israelis, they don't have shelters nor air sirens or alarms for that. So you basically need the fog of war to dissipate for the population to see again that the Ayatollah has no clothes and that it's safe to come out.

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Hypothetically, if you strike a missile base in Khorramabad, that's going to do nothing for your average Iranian protestor in Mashhad. But if you strike the law enforcement forces, command vehicles in Mashhad, that's going to do a lot of things for protestors in Mashhad. Same of course applies to Tehran. If you are in HaftHoz in Tehran and someone strikes a missile base in Yazd, that does nothing to pave the pathway for you. But all of a sudden, if you begin to see Basij battalions around where you live in East Tehran begin to go down or get struck, that will do a lot in inspiring confidence for you.

DOUGHERTY: Andrew Bernard at JNS asks, "How would you characterize what Iran has been able to launch at Israel and the Arab Gulf countries in terms of drones and missiles? Is it impressive, unimpressive, expected? Is there a reason to think that the number of launches might decline as this campaign continues, or can Iran sustain this?"

BEN TALEBLU: All of us or?

DOUGHERTY: Yeah, let's start with you, Benham, because I know that you're a leading expert on Iran's missile capabilities.

BEN TALEBLU: I'll be brief. The firing strategy for Israel is inspired by the latter part, particularly the last fourth of the 12-Day War, so the last three, four days, where, again, what Mark was saying, the Israelis were defending a shrinking area and obviously normal residential houses, schools, hospitals were not within that priority area for all of their layered air and missile defense. That thinking is animating the Iranians, but also the desire to keep as much as they can in reserve. They know the Israelis tried to strike production in October 2024. They know that the Israelis tried to strike bases in June 2025. They're afraid of a contagion effect on all of those things. They don't want to be in a position of use it or lose it. I would say that they're not fully there yet, even though they're bringing online B2s to potentially collapse the subterranean facilities that Iranians have is a real risk, and that could lead some of Iran's missile garrisons to use it or lose it.

In general, I would say they're shepherding and conserving a lot of their resources, trying to test and draw out and have both time be in their favor and have missile math be in their favor.

And with respect to the GCC, even though it is very shocking, it is not at all surprising, because the regime had been telegraphing this that they would widen the war. And if we've been paying attention to the hard line Iranian press for the past six to eight years, they have talked about a lot of these GCC countries as simply being glass towers that could be a hit with drones and missiles.

DOUGHERTY: Wrapping up just a couple minutes left. Do have a final question for David. David, if you can respond quickly: Were you surprised at the missile launch last night from Hezbollah and Israel's response, including apparently with Iron Beam, I believe?

DAUD: So there were reports that Iron Beam had intercepted the missile, but there were denials of that report. So it's unclear if this was the first operational use of Iron Beam.

Was I surprised by Hezbollah's launch? Not entirely. If you go back to January 26th of 2026, Naim Qassem, Secretary General of Hezbollah, said that Hezbollah would not remain neutral in the case of the US war on Iran. He declined to say at the time, however, whether this meant that Hezbollah would intervene militarily or not. He said this would be decided by the facts on the ground as the battlefield proceeded.

Now, did this moment ... There are many questions about what Hezbollah did last night. First of all, it's whether they believe that the regime is in danger. This was the first part that I would've assumed that would've led Hezbollah to enter into the conflict, whether they viewed that the regime in Iran was in danger and whether their military action and military intervention could at least take pressure off the regime and increase its chances of survival. So this may indicate that Hezbollah is starting to see that there is a genuine danger to the regime that is forming from concerted US and Israeli military action.

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At the same time, Hezbollah should have known that if they're in for a penny, they're in for a pound when it comes to Israeli military action. If a single bullet, it was very clear for months now, that if a single bullet had crossed the border from Lebanon into Israel, the Israelis would've responded with the full force that we're seeing in Lebanon right now. The Israelis were looking for an excuse, to put it bluntly, to continue the degradation of Hezbollah that they were not able to finish over the past year. For months now, the Israelis have been saying... Naim Qassem on September 27th of 2025 was boasting that Hezbollah's regeneration activities were outpacing Israeli military operations, and the Israelis started tacitly accepting that by intensifying operations in the months afterwards, including killing Hezbollah's Chief of Staff Haytham Ali Tabatabai, who the Israelis said was overseeing this regeneration effort.

So the Israelis have been looking for this excuse and Hezbollah gave it to them. So what I don't understand when it comes to Hezbollah is if you realize that whatever you do, the Israelis are going to respond with full force, why only a tiny barrage? There was no ... And a tiny barrage that thankfully caused no damage in Israel, no harm to Israelis. When you know that the Israelis are going to respond no matter what with the full brunt of their military force, why not go all in? The expectation that firing a small barrage at Israel, a small attack of Israel, would lead to this war being contained was simply delusional.

So I truly don't understand Hezbollah's motivation to enter into the war in the way that they did. Not to enter into the war period, fine, but in the way that they did remains enigmatic. Why not go all in and why maintain this very, or why engage in this very limited attack? And it seems like they've only claimed the one attack since last night, nothing since then. There have been some hostile aircraft intrusions according to Red Alert. It's unclear if the source of those is Lebanon or Iran. So the underwhelming nature of Hezbollah's response remained enigmatic, but it seems to me that Hezbollah thinks that the Iranian regime is in danger, that their intervention is necessary to at least divert some of Israel's forces from continuing to strike in Iran, even though, as Mark noted earlier, the Israelis made a point of achieving total air superiority in Iran early on in the conflict, launching the biggest, according to the IDF, the biggest aerial operation in the country or in the country's history, with the anticipation that this would become a multifront conflict.

So it seems like Hezbollah has continued to misjudge the Israeli response and Israel's ability to continue fighting intensely on two separate fronts.

DOUGHERTY: Excellent. Thank you. Gentlemen, I'm going to give each of you 30 seconds to summarize your thoughts in just a moment. But before we do that, I want to thank all the journalists that are on the call today. Thank you for participating. We know that you have a lot going on and your time is limited, so we're grateful to have you. Reminder that you can find all of FDD's research at [FDD.org](https://fdd.org). If you would like to talk with Benham, David, or Mark separately, or Jonathan for that matter, please email press@fdd.org and we will arrange that for you. FDD is a nonpartisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy.

And I think we're ready now for the final moments. We'll start with Mark.

MONTGOMERY: Fantastic.

DOUGHERTY: And then Benham and wrap up with David.

MONTGOMERY: All right. I'm going to go real quick and just say the most important things is the Strait of Hormuz. In my mind, if Iran wants to get leverage in this thing, it's probably mining the Strait of Hormuz or putting the tankers at continued risk. The only problem is this is like a scorpion riding the frog's back. When they sting, one of the biggest economies hurt by shutting down the Strait of Hormuz will be the Iranian economy. So at some point, they'll be accountable for their own actions. Okay, thanks.

DOUGHERTY: Thanks, Mark. David, let's go to you. We'll wrap up with Benham.



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DAOUD: Again, in summary, we are here because the conditions necessary when a ceasefire goes into effect between Israel and Lebanon, Lebanon's going to have to pick up the slack. In November 27th, 2024, the conditions were not ripe for Lebanon to do so to break the barrier of fear that had restrained it from acting against Hezbollah meaningfully. It's allowed Hezbollah to regenerate. It's allowed Hezbollah to act with the freedom of action that we saw last night. And it seems now the Israelis, in their response, are not leaving this up to chance or up to the Lebanese government despite its strong stance that it took this morning. They're going after Hezbollah's, not just Hezbollah's personnel, not just its assets, but its ability to maintain the support of Shiites the day after the war and removing any impediment for Lebanon to continue or to actually take any meaningful action against Hezbollah if there is a ceasefire. But not taking any chances that this will fall to the Lebanese state, which again, has a proven track record of inaction against Hezbollah.

DOUGHERTY: Thank you, David. And Benham as your multitasking as you have been since early Saturday morning, we can wrap it up with you.

BEN TALEBLU: Thank you. Bless you. And thank you, in the words of Khamenei, for your heroic flexibility, as I deal with a few other calls and emails at the exact same time.

Listen, the forcing function for the current crisis, yes, there's a nuclear threat. Yes, there's a ballistic missile issue. The forcing function for the current crisis is the protests. The protests that we saw in late December and for the first two and a half, three weeks of January 2026 were the most widest and most demographically and geographically diverse in the past 47 years of the Islamic Republic, and they were also the most violently repressed. It was also against that backdrop, not against Iran's rising or reconstituting nuclear threat or missile threat that President Trump, depending on how you count, drew anywhere from eight to nine red lines and gave all those messages of support going beyond any other US president in recorded history in offering support and promising said support to the Iranian people.

There is no nuclear deal off-ramp to that situation, just as there is no mere limited war off-ramp to that kind of a situation. This is very much a go big or a go home moment for the president. Let's hope he actually sees it to conclusion. America, as I said before, has a lot of military wins in this part of the world. Very few political wins. It's critical that the White House actually nest this into an approach towards the Islamic Republic that helped push past it. Again, helps to empower one of the most pro American and one of the most pro Israeli societies in this part of the world if indeed the goal is, per the NSS, a Middle East that is focused on peace, prosperity, and stability.

There is no moving to pivot to Asia or the "Donroe Doctrine" if you leave the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism standing after this. This is, after all, how they declare a victory. And you can't keep afford to use more US national resources in the era of a rising China in the era of Great Power Competition if you are not going to put out the arsonist behind many of the fires in the region.

DOUGHERTY: Benham, David, thank you. FDD comms team doing all the great work in the background, thank you for everything that you're doing. To those on the call, thank you for participating. This does conclude today's call.