UNDERSTANDING THE IRAN WAR: A Primer

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with research compiled by his team

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> *"The context of our discussion is that I'm saying this is fucking life. Not that it's acceptable. It's horrible. It's why the human species is drifting toward extinction."* — Daniel Ellsberg, in conversation with Arn Menconi, *Lied to Death*, 2015

PREFACE

This document exists because the machinery of deception runs on schedule.

In May 2015, I spent ten days at Daniel Ellsberg's home and recorded more than forty hours of conversation with him about why the United States goes to war, and how its citizens are made to accept it.

For younger readers who may not know the name: Daniel Ellsberg was, by any serious reckoning, the most important whistleblower in American history. A former Marine company commander, a Harvard-trained economist, a strategic analyst at the RAND Corporation who helped draft U.S. nuclear war plans, and a senior Pentagon official who served in Vietnam — Ellsberg had the highest security clearances in the country and direct knowledge of how American wars were planned, justified, and concealed. In 1971, at the age of 40, facing up to 115 years in prison, he leaked 7,000 pages

of classified documents to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Those documents — the Pentagon Papers — proved that four successive American presidents had systematically lied to Congress and the public about the Vietnam War. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of publication in a landmark First Amendment case. Richard Nixon called Ellsberg "the most dangerous man in America." Henry Kissinger called him "the most dangerous man in the world." The case against Ellsberg was dismissed when a federal judge discovered that the Nixon White House had broken into his psychiatrist's office and sent CIA operatives to assault him — the same pattern of lawlessness that led to Watergate and Nixon's resignation. Ellsberg spent the remaining fifty years of his life as the country's foremost authority on government deception and nuclear risk, championing every major whistleblower from Chelsea Manning to Edward Snowden. He was, in every sense, the conscience of a national security state that didn't want one.

We published the result of our ten days together as *Lied to Death: Conversations with Daniel Ellsberg on Why We Go to War*, a 13-chapter audiobook available at SoundCloud.

Ellsberg died in June 2023 at the age of 92, with his warning still largely unheeded. He had spent his final years insisting that the nuclear threat was not theoretical, that the next war of lies was already being prepared, and that ordinary people — not presidents, not generals, not corporate executives — were the only force in history to have ever stopped such machinery.

On February 28, 2026, I watched his warning become operational reality. The United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran. The strikes were massive, fast, and precisely executed. The justifications were false. The consequences — military, legal, economic, civilizational — are unfolding around us now.

This primer is my attempt to document what is happening, why it is happening, and what it means — with the depth and density that a moment this serious demands. It draws on the Ellsberg conversations, on the best available research, on the testimony of experts from across the ideological spectrum, and on a career of anti-war activism that has included seven arrests and a vote, as Eagle County Commissioner in 2001, that I cast alone.

Speaker identification note: In all transcribed conversations from *Lied to Death*, Speaker_0 is Arn Menconi and Speaker_1 is Daniel Ellsberg.

The primer is organized as a briefing document, not a polemic. It is for people who want to understand — fully, rigorously, without being managed — what is happening to their country and their world.

PART I: THE PATTERN — How America Goes to War

The Ellsberg Framework: Covert Foreign Policy vs. Stated Foreign Policy

The most important insight Daniel Ellsberg communicated in our 2015 conversations — the one that most surprised even him, after decades inside the national security apparatus — was not about a specific lie or a specific war. It was about the structural nature of American foreign policy itself.

"What I would now say," Ellsberg told me, "is something different from what I would have understood ten years ago. Our government is not a government with a covert operations agency named the CIA. It's a government within which has a covert foreign policy — which is different from what it says."

This is a precise and devastating distinction. Everybody knows, Ellsberg said, that the CIA does covert things. The standard narrative allows for that — dangerous world, necessary secrets, unfortunate but unavoidable. What that standard narrative conceals is something more fundamental: **the policy itself is covert**. The aims, the alliances, the actual objectives of American foreign policy are systematically different from what is communicated to the public, to Congress, and often to the soldiers asked to fight.

"I've spent a lot of time defining what I mean by covert," Ellsberg continued, "but what I mean is deceptive, lying, false. In two major dimensions. The policy is false, is deceptive, is covert. What its aims are, what it's aiming at. And the means are covert. It's not just the means. The policy as a whole is covert — meaning we're doing something, with different purposes, different allies, different from what we claim to the public. We have a different nature. The government is different from what we think."

This framework — covert foreign policy as the operating system, publicly stated policy as the interface — explains the otherwise inexplicable consistency of the pattern. Why do the stated reasons for every war turn out to be false? Not because of isolated intelligence failures, not because of individual bad actors. Because the stated reasons were never the real reasons.

The real reasons, Ellsberg argued, are a consistent function of what he called "the imperial system" — an apparatus for maintaining American economic and military hegemony over the global south, which cannot survive in daylight because it is incompatible with the democracy it claims to represent.

"Are we then in favor of freedom and democracy and independence? No. We're against that. Regimes that favor the public of those countries would be unfavorable to U.S. corporate interests. On the other hand, those that favor our interests couldn't stay in power in elections. Regimes that kill community organizers, peasant organizers, union leaders — priests, nuns — they're not popular. They couldn't stay in power in a free election, to pursue those policies which our corporations want."

The Military-Industrial Complex — And Why Oil Is the Better Approximation

Ellsberg offered an important corrective to the standard Eisenhower framing. Most people, when trying to explain American foreign policy, reach for "the military-industrial complex" — the phrase Eisenhower coined in his January 1961 farewell address (originally drafted as the "military-industrial-**congressional** complex" before the "congressional" was removed for reasons never fully explained).

Ellsberg had been told one of the key contributors to that speech was Eisenhower's brother Milton, a university president. His assessment of what drove Eisenhower to give it:

"I think a major disillusion that he'd had was the opposition he got from the military, and the nuclear weapons labs — Livermore and Los Alamos — and the military industry, to the idea of a comprehensive test ban. Eisenhower really had wanted to achieve a comprehensive test ban. He found himself blocked from it by Edward Teller at the Livermore Labs and their allies in Congress."

But the military-industrial complex, Ellsberg warned, is too narrow a frame for explaining U.S. foreign policy:

"If you talk aerospace or tank companies or strictly military — to say that they control our foreign policy would be overstating it. They're a very important influence. To think that they're the only interest would be misleading."

The more accurate formulation, he argued, is oil:

"Is oil itself, energy in general, part of the military-industrial complex? It's obviously much more general than military. It's certainly industrial. But oil — if you were to say that our foreign policy, to a first approximation, was the policy of the oil majors, that would be a pretty good approximation, actually. Better than the military-industrial complex per se."

And beyond oil, the correct accounting includes corporate interests across sectors: in Central America, it was United Fruit, International Telephone and Telegraph, sugar companies, and railroad operators. In Chile, it was copper companies. In the Middle East, it is oil, arms sales, and the financial architecture of the petrodollar. The military-industrial complex is real. But it is one instrument of a broader imperial apparatus serving a broader set of interests.

"It's specific corporations, not necessarily military-industrial," Ellsberg said. "In Central America, United Fruit, later called Standard Brands, was probably a critical influence on our policy in the banana republics of Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador. Not only for bananas, of course. Other corporations ran the railroads. How about International Telegraph and IT and T? They ran the telegraph systems."

Such policies, he concluded, "cannot be implemented in democratic elections. So we are against democracy in those countries. If there is democracy, it is of a very facade-like charade, basically accompanied by a lot of killing of people who propose different policies."

Applied to Iran: the question is not simply "who profits from the bombs?" but "whose economic position does Iran threaten?" The answer is multi-dimensional: oil companies threatened by Iran's independent pricing; financial institutions threatened by Iran's SWIFT exclusion workarounds and yuan-oil deals; defense contractors who profit from the munitions; and the

petrodollar architecture itself, which requires that global oil remain dollar-denominated to sustain American deficit financing.

Ellsberg's formulation: "Why risk with such an approximation? Add to oil the military-industrial complex. And then, frankly, here's where the congressional part comes in. The campaign contributions and the media influence of these major corporations have a very great influence on Congress."

All of this is visible in Operation Epic Fury: the oil interests, the defense contractors meeting with the Pentagon the day after strikes began about the $50 billion supplemental, the AIPAC-financed congressional bloc that voted against the War Powers resolution, and the petrodollar infrastructure that Iran's BRICS membership and mBridge participation directly threaten.

This is Ellsberg speaking from inside the belly of the beast — from the Rand Corporation, from the Pentagon, from the highest echelons of the national security state — telling us that the gap between stated and actual policy is not an aberration. It is the design.

Empire as "The Human Condition": Sargon to Sumer to America

Ellsberg situated this analysis in the deepest possible historical context. During our conversations, he noted that he had been reading about the origins of empire:

"The detail you're looking at, and the phenomena we're talking about in the Middle East — in Iraq — may be said to have originated in Iraq about close to over 4,000 years ago, in every detail, with an empire. Sargon of Akkad, 24th century BC. Mesopotamia — Iraq. He was noted for his conquest of the Sumerian city-states. He's ruling kings. He's an emperor because he is a ruler of kings. It's ethnically diverse, a kingdom of kingdoms. Now, what I read about that empire then sounds exactly like imperial operations ever since — in every part of the world, in every century, in every millennium since. The imperial operations involve rival groups using violence, murder, coups, intrigue, bribery, and shifting alliances."

This is the long view that almost no policy analyst takes, and it matters immensely. The American empire is not a historical anomaly produced by

unique American character — for better or worse. It is the latest instantiation of a pattern as old as organized human civilization. Empire is not a policy option. It is, as the Chapter 1 intro of *Lied to Death* put it, "the human condition."

Ellsberg's Texas motorcycle gang analogy illuminates the same dynamic at human scale:

"There was always the potential for an outbreak of gunfire between them. The issue is what it has been for many years: who controlled the turf? Texas belonged to the Bandidos, basically. And one of the credos of both of these gangs was: you do not back down. You cannot lose territory. You cannot lose face. You cannot lose prestige. And I am saying, not just metaphorically, I'm saying this is, in the small, what's going on in the large. This battle for turf by gun — mainly male humans — whose identity is: we control this part of the world."

The Bandidos and the Cossacks fighting over territory in Waco, Texas, are operating by the same logic as the United States and Iran contesting the Persian Gulf. The scale differs. The psychological architecture does not.

The Lies That Launched Wars

The falsification of the justification for the Iran war in 2026 follows a pattern documented with precision across the last eighty years of American military history. Understanding each prior case is essential to understanding the present one.

The Gulf of Tonkin, August 1964

President Lyndon Johnson told Congress and the American public that U.S. destroyers had been attacked twice by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. The first incident, August 2, was real. The second, August 4, never happened.

NSA historian Robert J. Hanyok's declassified 2005 study, withheld for forty years, concluded the attack "did not occur despite claims to the contrary by the Johnson administration." NSA personnel had "deliberately skewed" signals intelligence to support the false claim. Johnson himself said privately: "Hell, those damn stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish." Former

North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp confirmed in 1995: "Absolutely nothing happened" on August 4.

The result: the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed the Senate 88-2, giving Johnson essentially unlimited war authority. Fifty-eight thousand, two hundred twenty Americans died. Between 1.5 million and 3.5 million Vietnamese died.

Iraq WMDs, 2003

"Every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources," Colin Powell told the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003. "These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence."

None of it was true. No WMDs existed. The mobile biological labs were hydrogen production facilities. The al-Qaeda collaboration was fabricated. Powell later called his speech "a great intelligence failure" and "a blot" on his record. The congressional vote was based entirely on the fabricated WMD rationale.

Result: 4,500 American deaths, an estimated 100,000–600,000 Iraqi civilian deaths, $2 trillion in costs, and a political vacuum that created ISIS.

Libya 2011

"The task that I assigned our forces is to protect the Libyan people from immediate danger," President Obama said on March 28, 2011. "Broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake."

On March 20, the first day of intervention, Tomahawk missiles struck Gaddafi's personal compound. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates later admitted: "The fiction was maintained" that the goal was limited. The UK Parliament's subsequent inquiry found the threat to civilians was "overstated" and the rebels "included a significant Islamist element."

Gaddafi had surrendered his nuclear program in 2003 in exchange for normalization with the West. He was nevertheless overthrown and killed. Libya has been a failed state since 2011.

Iran 2026: The Pattern Repeats

Senator Elizabeth Warren, after a classified briefing with Trump administration officials, delivered a statement on March 3, 2026 that deserves to stand as a historical document:

> "We are facing a dark moment in our country's history. On Saturday, Donald Trump decided to drag the American people into a reckless, illegal war with Iran. A war based on lies. A war launched with no imminent threat to our nation. Donald Trump said that Iran has restarted its nuclear program, but Donald Trump's own officials have said that is not true. Donald Trump claimed that Iran is developing long-range missiles that will soon be capable of hitting the United States. That directly goes against what his own government has claimed."

The Arms Control Association confirmed on March 3, 2026 that there was "no evidence to suggest that Iran is resuming proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities, such as uranium enrichment, that would be necessary to produce nuclear material for a bomb." The same assessment found Iran's conventional missile program did not constitute an "imminent threat" by the definition required by international law. An unnamed U.S. official acknowledged: "The threat from Iran is ultimately their ambition to acquire nuclear weapons, but **in the short term**, it is the conventional weapon... that pose a threat." This was the administration's own officials, in classified briefings, stating there was no imminent nuclear threat.

Secretary Rubio's own public explanation destroyed the legal case for "self-defense." He stated: "We knew that there was going to be an Israeli action. We knew that that would precipitate an attack against American forces." In other words: Iran had not attacked anyone. The U.S. struck *because it knew that Israel was going to act in a way that might cause Iran to retaliate.*

The Arms Control Association conclusion: "The absence of an imminent military threat and failure to follow through on diplomatic efforts to address concerns about Iran's sensitive nuclear activities demonstrates that this is a war of choice, waged in violation of international law and without the necessary approval from Congress."

War	Stated Justification	The Reality	Result
Vietnam 1964	Second Gulf of Tonkin attack	Fabricated; NSA confirmed 2005	58,220 U.S. deaths; 2M+ Vietnamese deaths
Iraq 2003	WMDs; Saddam-al-Qaeda link	No WMDs; no operational link	4,500 U.S. deaths; ISIS created
Libya 2011	Protect civilians; no regime change	Regime change from day one; threat overstated	Failed state; slave trade; decade of civil war
Iran 2026	Imminent nuclear/missile threat	Own officials denied imminent threat; diplomacy ongoing	Ongoing; 6 U.S. deaths through March 6; 1,230+ Iranian casualties

How the AUMF Enabled 22 Countries Across 4 Administrations

One week after September 11, 2001, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force. The vote: 98-0 in the Senate, 420-1 in the House. The sole dissenting vote was Rep. Barbara Lee, who called it "a blank check" and explicitly compared it to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. She was right.

The 2001 AUMF authorized the president to use force against those who "planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001." Iran did not. Iraq did not. Libya did not. Yemen's Houthis did not. Somalia's al-Shabaab did not. None of the 22+ countries in which force has been used under this authorization had anything to do with the September 11 attacks.

The mechanism was executive self-invention: presidents coined the phrase "al-Qaeda and associated forces" — language that appears nowhere in the AUMF text — to extend the authorization to any group they chose to designate as associated. By 2016, the Congressional Research Service found the AUMF had been cited 37 times in 14 countries. By 2026, it was 22+ countries.

General Mark Milley, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, testified in June 2021: "The 2001 AUMF is the one we need to hang on to. It is the critical one for us to continue operations."

The DOJ cited the same AUMF for warrantless electronic surveillance in *ACLU v. NSA* — entirely disconnected from its original authorization to target 9/11 perpetrators. Once written, war authorizations do not expire. They metastasize.

As Representative Gregory Meeks said when introducing legislation to repeal the 2001 AUMF in April 2023: "For too long, Congress has abdicated its constitutional prerogative over issues of war and peace to the Executive Branch, allowing administration after administration to engage the United States in forever wars."

PART II: THE HISTORY IRAN REMEMBERS — 73 Years of American Intervention

To understand why Iran does not accept American assurances of good faith — why Iranian leaders and Iranian people hear U.S. justifications for military action with a different set of ears than American audiences — one must understand the history that Iran remembers. Ellsberg's framework of covert foreign policy is not an abstraction to Iranians. It is lived experience: a CIA-backed coup that destroyed their democracy, a war in which the United States armed both sides and provided intelligence for chemical weapons attacks, a secret arms-for-hostages scheme conducted while Americans publicly called Iran a terrorist state, and an alleged campaign to steal an election by prolonging the captivity of American citizens. This history is not ancient. The oldest of these events occurred 73 years ago. The most recent ended 35 years ago. Every Iranian over 50 grew up in the shadow of Operation Ajax. Every Iranian military planner has studied what American intelligence assistance meant during the Iran-Iraq War. Understanding this history is not an apology for the Islamic Republic — it is the minimum requirement for understanding why the current conflict exists and where it is headed.

Operation Ajax (1953): The CIA/MI6 Coup Against Mossadegh

On August 19, 1953, the streets of Tehran erupted in violence that changed the course of the Middle East for generations. What appeared to ordinary observers as a popular uprising was in fact a covert operation planned in Washington and London — the first regime-change operation ever carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency. Its code name was Operation Ajax (officially TP-AJAX in CIA documents; the British called their component Operation Boot). Its target: Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran. Its purpose: to protect British oil profits and secure Cold War strategic dominance. Its legacy: the chain of cause and effect that produced the Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, and decades of US-Iran enmity.

The Nationalization That Triggered the Coup

Mossadegh, elected Prime Minister in April 1951, had risen to power on a wave of popular nationalism centered on a single galvanizing demand: Iranian oil for Iranians. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) — later renamed British Petroleum — had operated in Iran since 1913 under terms widely regarded as exploitative. The AIOC refused to even open its books for an independent audit, and Iran received only a fraction of oil revenues that would have been standard under a 50-50 arrangement already common elsewhere, such as in Venezuela. When the Iranian Majles (parliament) voted to nationalize the oil industry, Mossadegh implemented the law. The AIOC ceased operations and Britain organized an international blockade of Iranian oil exports, creating an economic stranglehold intended to break Mossadegh's government. (Operation Ajax, Latin Library)

Cold War Framing and American Involvement

Britain initially sought U.S. support during the Truman administration, which refused, viewing the coup idea as a violation of Iranian sovereignty. When Dwight Eisenhower took office in January 1953, the calculus changed. The CIA and British intelligence repackaged Mossadegh — who was a secular nationalist democrat, a graduate of Swiss universities, and a constitutionalist — as a Communist fellow-traveler who might open Iran to Soviet influence. The evidence for this was thin. Scholars later found that the communist Tudeh Party "lacked the intention or the ability to gain control of the

government" and that the U.S. decision to oust Mossadegh "was not made on the basis of strong evidence that a Communist takeover might otherwise soon occur." (Texas National Security Review, 2019) Iran's border with the Soviet Union, however, gave hawkish policymakers the Cold War rationale they needed. A declassified CIA document later confirmed: "Available documents do not indicate who authorized CIA to begin planning the operation, but it almost certainly was President Eisenhower himself. Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose has written that the absence of documentation reflected the President's style." (National Security Archive CIA documents)

Kermit Roosevelt Jr. and the Mechanics of the Coup

The man CIA Director Allen Dulles sent to Tehran was Kermit Roosevelt Jr., a grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt. He entered Iran secretly and established himself in a basement office. What followed was a masterclass in manufactured reality: Roosevelt's team bribed newspaper editors to print anti-Mossadegh propaganda, hired mobs to pose as Tudeh communists (the better to stoke fear of communism), paid protestors to cause mayhem in Mossadegh's name, and ultimately organized paid street crowds and pro-Shah military units to converge on key government buildings. According to the Zinn Education Project, "that 'backing' involved Kermit Roosevelt, CIA agent and grandson of Theodore, arriving in Tehran with suitcases full of cash to manufacture an opposition movement by hiring people to protest, bribing newspaper editors to print misinformation, and creating a sham communist party to act as a straw man." (Zinn Education Project) Roosevelt also worked personally to convince the hesitant young Shah to sign royal decrees (firmans) dismissing Mossadegh and appointing the CIA-approved General Fazlollah Zahedi as Prime Minister.

The first coup attempt, on August 15-16, 1953, failed. Mossadegh had been tipped off; loyal officers arrested the coup's military emissary. The Shah fled to Rome. Roosevelt received orders from Washington to abort. He ignored them. Working with Zahedi (hidden under a blanket in the back seat of a car) and Iranian agents, Roosevelt orchestrated a second attempt on August 19. Pro-Shah forces and paid crowds seized radio stations and government buildings. After two hours of gunfire around Mossadegh's residence, he escaped over a garden wall and was arrested the next day. An estimated 200-300 people were killed in the fighting. Roosevelt cabled Washington: the

Shah "will be returned to Tehran in triumph shortly. Love and kisses from all the team." (Los Angeles Times obituary of Kermit Roosevelt Jr., 2000)

The CIA's 2013 Formal Admission

For six decades, CIA documents on Operation Ajax were classified or heavily redacted. Then, on August 19, 2013 — the 60th anniversary of the coup — the National Security Archive published newly declassified CIA materials that constituted, as Archive Deputy Director Malcolm Byrne described it, "the CIA's first formal acknowledgement that the agency helped to plan and execute the coup." The internal history, titled *The Battle for Iran*, stated the operation was carried out "under CIA direction" and "as an act of U.S. foreign policy, conceived and approved at the highest levels of government." (National Security Archive, August 19, 2013) The CIA's own declassified PDF from the operation is available directly from the agency's reading room: the agency acknowledged that Norman Schwarzkopf Sr. was sent to train the security forces that would become SAVAK, and that U.S. funds went to pro-Shah mob organizers known derisively as "Behbahani dollars." (CIA Reading Room document)

The Consequences: 26 Years of Authoritarian Rule, SAVAK, and Blowback

The Shah spent the next 26 years in power — increasingly autocratic, increasingly dependent on his American patron, and increasingly brutal. SAVAK (Sazeman-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar, or Organization for Intelligence and National Security) was established in 1957 with direct CIA and Mossad assistance. CIA officers trained SAVAK interrogators in techniques Amnesty International later described as including "electric shocks to sensitive areas, prolonged sleep deprivation, hanging from ceilings, sexual violence, threats against family members" and the infamous "Apollo" technique — strapping a prisoner to a heated metal bed. A senior CIA officer was "involved in instructing officials in the Savak on torture techniques... based on German torture techniques from World War II," according to recovered embassy documents. (Encyclopedia.com: Human Rights Abuses in Shahist Iran) Amnesty International's 1976 report declared Iran one of the worst human rights violators in the world. When the Shah was asked directly about torture by *Le Monde* in October 1976, he replied: "Why should we not

employ the same methods as you Europeans? We have learned sophisticated methods of torture from you."

The 1979 Iranian Revolution was not simply an Islamist takeover — it was the accumulated rage of a people who had been robbed of their democracy by foreign powers, lived for a generation under CIA-assisted torture, and watched Western governments continue to support their oppressor. "The coup lit the fuse for the 1979 Islamic Revolution," as PBS NewsHour reported on the 70th anniversary of the event. One Tehran resident put it plainly: "The U.S. planted hatred in the hearts of Iranians" through the coup. The students who seized the U.S. Embassy in November 1979 and held 52 Americans for 444 days cited the coup, and the CIA's role in creating SAVAK, as justification. Mossadegh, imprisoned for three years and then kept under house arrest until his death in 1967, remains one of the most popular figures in Iranian history. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged in March 2000 that the coup "clearly was a setback for Iran's political development and it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America." The blowback from 1953 continues to shape U.S.-Iran relations today.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988): US Support for Both Sides

The Iran-Iraq War, which began with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980 and ended in a ceasefire in August 1988, was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the twentieth century. Conservative estimates place the dead at one million; some estimates go higher. It was also, uniquely, a war in which the United States provided meaningful assistance to both sides — selling arms to Iran (secretly) while publicly tilting toward Iraq, providing Saddam with satellite intelligence as he used chemical weapons against Iranian forces, and ultimately shooting down a civilian Iranian airliner with 290 people aboard. The underlying U.S. goal, as one former official later acknowledged, was to ensure that neither side won — to bleed both revolutionary Iran and secular Iraq simultaneously, maintaining a strategic stalemate in the Gulf.

The Reagan Tilt Toward Iraq

When the Iran-Iraq War began, the Carter administration was still consumed by the hostage crisis and maintained formal hostility toward Iran. The Reagan administration, entering office in January 1981, pursued a more calculated strategy. Iraq had been on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism since the list's creation; in February 1982, the Reagan administration removed Iraq from that list specifically to enable broader trade and military cooperation. (Wikipedia: US Support for Iraq During the Iran-Iraq War; Democracy Now, June 9, 2004) Reagan then signed National Security Decision Directive 99, and in June 1982 signed another directive determining that "The United States could not afford to allow Iraq to lose the war to Iran."

By mid-1982, Iran's military had driven Iraqi forces back across the border and was threatening to push into Iraq itself. The Reagan administration accelerated its pro-Iraq posture. More than 60 officers of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) were secretly providing detailed satellite imagery and mapping information on Iranian troop deployments to Iraqi commanders. As Colonel Rick Francona, a military attaché in Baghdad during the 1988 strikes, told *Foreign Policy*: "The Iraqis never told us that they intended to use nerve gas. They didn't have to. We already knew." (Foreign Policy: CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran, August 26, 2013)

The Rumsfeld Handshake and Chemical Weapons

In late November 1983, Reagan selected Donald Rumsfeld — later Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush — as his personal envoy to the Middle East. On December 20, 1983, Rumsfeld met with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. Photographs of the handshake became iconic. According to National Security Archive documents, Rumsfeld "emphasized his close relationship with President Reagan" and the two discussed "shared enmity toward Iran and Syria." (National Security Archive: Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein, Briefing Book No. 82; thirdworldtraveler.com document from NSA) Critically, by November 1983, the State Department had been briefed on Iraq's "almost daily use" of chemical weapons. Rumsfeld made no reference to chemical weapons during his December meeting with Saddam.

CIA documents declassified and reported by *Foreign Policy* in 2013 reveal the full depth of U.S. complicity. Top CIA officials, including Director William Casey, were told about Iraqi chemical weapons assembly plants, that

Iraq was producing mustard gas, and that U.S. satellite intelligence would be used for offensives in which nerve agents would be deployed. "As Iraqi attacks continue and intensify the chances increase that Iranian forces will acquire a shell containing mustard gas with Iraqi markings," the CIA reported in a November 1983 Top Secret document. "Tehran would take such evidence to the U.N. and charge U.S. complicity in violating international law." The CIA's response was not to stop the intelligence sharing — it was to worry about the public relations fallout. (Foreign Policy, 2013) A former U.S. intelligence official put it plainly: "It was all done with a wink and a nod. We knew exactly where this stuff was going, although we bent over backwards to look the other way." (Los Angeles Times/Montclair State University archive)

In early 1988, in the final months of the war, the United States provided satellite imagery and detailed maps of Iranian troop movements prior to four major Iraqi offensives — offensives in which Iraq used mustard gas and sarin nerve agent. "These attacks helped to tilt the war in Iraq's favor and bring Iran to the negotiating table, and they ensured that the Reagan administration's long-standing policy of securing an Iraqi victory would succeed," *Foreign Policy* reported. The CIA estimated that thousands of Iranian soldiers were killed or wounded in each of four chemical weapons attacks conducted with U.S. intelligence assistance. Two-thirds of all chemical weapons Iraq used during the entire war were fired in the last 18 months — the period of most intensive U.S. intelligence cooperation.

The United States also facilitated the export of more than $1.5 billion in "dual-use" technology to Iraq between 1985 and 1990. According to an investigation by House Banking Committee Chairman Henry Gonzalez, "about two of every seven licenses for the export of 'dual use' technology items approved between 1985 and 1990 by the U.S. Department of Commerce 'went either directly to the Iraqi armed forces, to Iraqi end-users engaged in weapons production, or to Iraqi enterprises suspected of diverting technology' to weapons of mass destruction." (Los Angeles Times, February 13, 1991) Bell 214ST helicopters sold to Iraq as "civilian" craft were later used to drop poison gas on Kurdish civilians at Halabja in March 1988. "U.S. intelligence sources say they believe that the American-built helicopters were among those dropping the deadly bombs." The Senate unanimously passed sanctions against Iraq in response; the Reagan White House killed the legislation.

The Shooting Down of Iran Air Flight 655

On July 3, 1988, as the war was entering its final weeks, the USS Vincennes — a U.S. Navy guided-missile cruiser operating in the Persian Gulf — shot down Iran Air Flight 655 with two surface-to-air missiles. The aircraft, an Airbus A300 on a scheduled commercial flight from Bandar Abbas to Dubai, was flying within its authorized commercial air corridor in Iranian territorial waters. All 290 people aboard were killed. Among the dead were 65 children. (Wikipedia: Iran Air Flight 655; EBSCO Military History)

The *Vincennes* had entered Iranian territorial waters while engaged in combat with Iranian gunboats. The ship's captain, William C. Rogers III, misidentified the ascending civilian airliner as an Iranian F-14 on a descending attack run. The Aegis Combat System aboard the *Vincennes* actually recorded the plane climbing — not descending — at the time of the incident. The Department of Defense initially reported the ship had shot down an Iranian F-14; it retracted this within hours. The U.S. government never formally apologized for the shootdown. In 1996, the United States paid Iran $61.8 million in compensation to families of the 248 Iranian victims — without acknowledging legal liability. Captain Rogers received the Legion of Merit upon his return home. (CNN, January 10, 2020) To Iranians, the incident remains a central grievance — President Rouhani referenced the 290 victims in a January 2020 tweet responding to Trump's threat to strike 52 Iranian sites: "Those who mention the number 52 should also keep in mind number 655."

The totality of U.S. conduct during the Iran-Iraq War — supporting both sides, providing intelligence for chemical weapons attacks, and shooting down a civilian airliner — represents one of the most cynical episodes in American foreign policy. The professed goal of neutrality masked a strategic calculation: keep the war going, keep both sides too weakened to dominate the Gulf, and protect American access to oil. Both countries paid in blood. The United States paid in the corrosion of its moral authority.

The Iran-Contra Affair

The Iran-Contra affair, which became public in November 1986, was not simply a political scandal — it was a window into the operational reality of American foreign policy: a White House that secretly sold arms to Iran (the country it publicly called a terrorist state) while illegally funding right-wing

death squads in Nicaragua, and then lied to Congress about all of it. The affair demonstrated with extraordinary clarity that the Reagan administration treated Iran simultaneously as an enemy in its public rhetoric and as an arms customer in its covert operations — a contradiction that could only exist in a system where covert power operated entirely outside democratic accountability.

The Two-Sided Scheme

The Iran-Contra operation had two interlocking components. The first involved selling weapons to Iran — a country under U.S. arms embargo — via Israeli intermediaries. The official justification, developed after the fact, was that the sales were intended to secure the release of American hostages being held in Lebanon by Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed group. The second involved taking the profits from those arms sales and funneling them illegally to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels — right-wing paramilitary fighters attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government — in explicit violation of the Boland Amendment, which Congress had passed precisely to prohibit such funding.

The Boland Amendment — actually a series of three legislative amendments passed between 1982 and 1984 — prohibited the CIA, the Department of Defense, and "any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities" from using appropriated funds to support the Contras. Reagan had signed it into law. He then told National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane to "keep the Contras together 'body and soul,' no matter what Congress voted for." (Wikipedia: Iran-Contra Affair) The Reagan administration argued that the NSC was not covered by the Boland Amendment — a position most constitutional scholars rejected.

Oliver North, John Poindexter, and "the Enterprise"

The operational hub of the scheme was Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a military aide at the National Security Council. North, working with NSC head Admiral John Poindexter, used a network they called "the Enterprise" — involving retired Air Force Major General Richard Secord, Israeli arms dealer Manucher Ghorbanifar, and Saudi billionaire Adnan Khashoggi — to move weapons to Iran and cash to the Contras across two continents. The dealings required "a long chain of secret deals with shady arms dealers, mercenaries, money changers, drug runners, and terrorists," as American Heritage

magazine summarized. (American Heritage: Reagan and the Iran-Contra Scandal)

Between November 1985 and November 1986, the U.S. shipped anti-tank TOW missiles and HAWK anti-aircraft missiles to Iran. A portion of the $48 million Iran paid was diverted by North to the Contras. When Attorney General Edwin Meese discovered the diversion in November 1986, North was fired and Poindexter resigned. Poindexter was later convicted of five counts including conspiracy and obstruction of justice; North was convicted of three counts including aiding and abetting in the obstruction of Congress. Both convictions were overturned on appeal because the witnesses at their trials had been tainted by their immunized congressional testimony. (Encyclopedia Britannica: Iran-Contra Affair)

The Tower Commission and Congressional Investigation

Reagan created the Tower Commission — named for former Senator John Tower, with Edmund Muskie and Brent Scowcroft — to investigate. The 200-page Tower Commission Report, released February 26, 1987, confirmed the arms-for-hostages policy and rebuked Reagan's "management style." It found that Reagan had largely delegated the operation to subordinates and maintained "plausible deniability." (PBS: The Iran-Contra Affair) A parallel Congressional investigation produced a majority report, signed by all Democrats and three Republican senators, that found the NSC had "covertly raised money for the contras, established an organization for supplying them with arms, attempted to ransom hostages, transferred arms to Iran, and diverted to the contras money from the sales of those arms — all without presidential authorization." The report also found that "senior officials within the Reagan administration had knowingly misled Congress."

Reagan's public testimony was a masterwork of selective amnesia. He told the Tower Commission that he had not been aware of the diversion and could not recall key meetings. His diary entries, which he sought to keep from investigators, showed he was far more informed than he admitted. Like many of his closest advisers, Reagan "lied to Congress and the American people when he falsely claimed he was unaware of nearly everything," as American Heritage concluded.

The Bush Pardons

On Christmas Eve, 1992 — twelve days before former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger was to go to trial, and after Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh had revealed notes from a 1986 meeting showing then-Vice President Bush had supported the arms deals — President George H.W. Bush pardoned Weinberger and five other Iran-Contra defendants: former National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, former Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, and three former CIA officials. (Walsh Iran-Contra Report, Chapter 28: George Bush; Brown University: The Pardons) Walsh's response was withering: "The pardon of Caspar Weinberger and other Iran-contra defendants undermines the principle that no man is above the law. It demonstrates that powerful people with powerful allies can commit serious crimes in high office — deliberately abusing the public trust without consequence... The Iran-contra cover-up, which has continued for more than six years, has now been completed."

Bush had told the public he was "out of the loop" on Iran-Contra. His own diary — which he concealed from investigators for years — showed otherwise. Weinberger's notes from the critical January 7, 1986 meeting of Reagan's senior advisors read: "VP favored" — referring to Bush's support for the Iranian arms deal. The pardons, Walsh noted, meant that "powerful people with powerful allies can commit serious crimes in high office — deliberately abusing the public trust without consequence." It was a lesson that would be applied in subsequent administrations.

The Iran-Contra affair matters not merely as history but as a template. It showed that U.S. policy toward Iran was never simply about ideology or security — it was about maintaining leverage, selling weapons to both sides of a conflict, and using proceeds to fund illegal covert wars. The "enemy" was also, simultaneously, a valued arms customer.

The October Surprise: Reagan's Alleged Deal to Delay Hostage Release

The October Surprise refers to the allegation — supported by substantial circumstantial evidence, confirmed by at least one former Iranian president, and re-energized by a 2023 New York Times report — that agents of the 1980 Reagan-Bush presidential campaign secretly negotiated with Iranian officials to delay the release of 52 American hostages until after the November election, in exchange for future arms deliveries. If true, it constitutes one of

the most serious acts of political treason in American history: a presidential campaign deliberately prolonging the captivity of American citizens to win an election, and depriving a sitting president of an October Surprise that might have saved his presidency.

The Suspicious Timing

The basic facts are not in dispute. On January 20, 1981, 52 American hostages who had been held for 444 days were released by Iran — literally within minutes of Ronald Reagan taking the oath of office. Jimmy Carter, who had been up all night awaiting news, was informed of the release only after Reagan had been inaugurated. Carter had negotiated the release through back-channels in Algiers; the final agreement was ready for signature for days before the inauguration. Why did the Iranians wait? (1980 October Surprise theory, Wikipedia) The theory holds that Iran had a better offer waiting — and was honoring a deal made with the Reagan campaign.

Gary Sick and the NSC Evidence

The allegations gained mainstream credibility when Gary Sick — a naval officer who had served as President Carter's principal aide for Iranian affairs on the National Security Council — published an editorial in the *New York Times* on April 15, 1991, stating: "I have been told repeatedly that individuals associated with the Reagan-Bush campaign of 1980 met secretly with Iranian officials to delay the release of the American hostages until after the presidential election." Sick subsequently published a book, *October Surprise*, laying out his evidence. (1980 October Surprise theory, Wikipedia; Robert Parry, FAIR.org) Sick alleged that future CIA Director William Casey, who was Reagan's campaign manager, made a secret deal with Iran, with Israel serving as the arms conduit. The precise timeline Sick outlined: meetings in Madrid, Washington, and Paris between Casey's emissaries and Iranian representatives; on October 21-23, Israel secretly shipped F-4 aircraft tires to Iran in violation of the U.S. embargo; the hostages were dispersed to different locations; and on January 20, 1981, they were released minutes after Reagan's inauguration.

Abolhassan Bani-Sadr's Confirmation

Former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who was deposed in a coup in June 1981, has consistently maintained that a deal was struck. In an interview cited in multiple sources, Bani-Sadr stated: "It is now very clear

that there were two separate agreements, one the official agreement with Carter in Algeria, the other, a secret agreement with another party, which, it is now apparent, was Reagan. They made a deal with Reagan that the hostages should not be released until after Reagan became president. So, then in return, Reagan would give them arms. We have published documents which show that US arms were shipped, via Israel, in March, about 2 months after Reagan became president." (WRMEA: Did Iran Delay Hostages Release?, October 1987) Bani-Sadr also stated: "Ayatollah Khomeini and Ronald Reagan had organized a clandestine negotiation, later known as the 'October Surprise,' which prevented the attempts by myself and then-US President Jimmy Carter to free the hostages before the 1980 US presidential election."

The 1993 Congressional Investigation

Congress established the House October Surprise Task Force in 1992, which reported its findings in January 1993. The Task Force found "no credible evidence" of a deal — but it was a deeply limited investigation, criticized for relying heavily on documents and witnesses that were incomplete or had been previously vetted by the CIA. Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh and investigative journalist Robert Parry both expressed frustration with the investigation's limitations. Parry, who had produced the original *Frontline* documentary on the subject in April 1991, argued that the Task Force's dismissals were based on flawed evidence and that key documentation — including Secret Service records that had been redacted — had never been fully examined. (FAIR.org: October Reprisals) Craig Unger, writing in December 2024, concluded more bluntly: "The October surprise really happened." (Verdict/Justia, December 30, 2024)

Ben Barnes and the 2023 New York Times Report

In March 2023, investigative reporter Peter Baker published a bombshell report in the *New York Times*. Ben Barnes — a former Texas Lieutenant Governor, a lifelong Democrat, and at 85 one of the last surviving witnesses — came forward to describe what he had seen 43 years earlier. Barnes told the Times that his mentor, former Texas Governor John Connally (who had switched to the Republican Party and sought the 1980 GOP nomination before losing to Reagan), took him on a secret trip through the Middle East in the summer of 1980 — visiting Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. According to Barnes, at each stop, Connally delivered a message:

tell Iran that "Ronald Reagan's going to be elected president and you need to get the word to Iran that they're going to make a better deal with Reagan than they are Carter." (New York Times, March 18, 2023)

After returning to the U.S., Barnes recounted, Connally briefed William Casey in an airport lounge. Casey specifically asked whether the Iranians "were going to hold the hostages." Barnes told the Times: "I'll go to my grave believing that it was the purpose of the trip. It wasn't freelancing because Casey was so interested in hearing as soon as we got back to the United States." Historical documents confirmed the trip occurred and that Connally was in contact with Reagan associates during and after it. Both Connally (died 1993) and Casey (died 1987) are no longer alive to contest or confirm Barnes's account. (Business Insider, March 18, 2023)

The Iran-Contra arms deliveries — which began within months of Reagan's inauguration — are consistent with the theory that arms were the promised quid pro quo. Iran-Contra Independent Counsel Walsh himself noted that "the U.S. arms sales to Iran dated back to 1981, well before the hostage siege in Lebanon" that was later used as the official justification. (National Archives blog on Iran-Contra) Whether or not the October Surprise occurred exactly as described, what is certain is that the Reagan administration began secretly arming Iran almost immediately upon taking office — consistent with a prior commitment.

PART III: OPERATION EPIC FURY — What Happened and Why

Shabbat Zachor: The War Begins on a Jewish Holy Day

February 28, 2026 was the Shabbat before Purim — specifically, *Shabbat Zachor*, the "Sabbath of Remembrance," which according to Jewish law is the Shabbat immediately preceding the Purim holiday. Purim itself was observed beginning at sundown on Monday, March 2, continuing through Tuesday, March 3 — the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar, 5786. (Ynet News: Everything you need to know about Purim 2026; CalendarDate.com: Purim

2026) Shushan Purim — observed in Jerusalem and other ancient walled cities — was celebrated March 3-4.

Purim is the holiday commemorating the events described in the Book of Esther: a Jewish woman who became queen to the Persian King Ahasuerus (identified with the historical Xerxes I), and who, with her uncle Mordechai, saved the Jewish people from Haman, the king's advisor who had issued a royal decree for the annihilation of all Jews in the Persian Empire. The reversal of fate — *venahafoch hu* in Hebrew — is central to the holiday's meaning. Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordechai. The holiday is celebrated with reading the Book of Esther, costumes, sending food gifts, giving to the poor, and a festive meal. Biblical scholars note that the story is set in ancient Persia — the historical name for the territory that is today the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Death of Iranian Leader Just Before Purim, March 2, 2026)

The Timing of the Attack

Early on February 28, 2026 — Shabbat Zachor — U.S. and Israeli forces launched a massive joint military campaign against Iran, named "Operation Epic Fury" by the Pentagon. President Trump announced the beginning of "major combat operations" against Iran in a video posted to social media, declaring the operation was "to defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime." (RFE/RL: Middle East on Edge as Trump Launches Major Combat Operation, February 28, 2026) Israeli airstrikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and several senior Iranian military and intelligence officials. Both Trump and Netanyahu publicly stated that the objective extended to regime change. The strikes targeted Tehran, Qom, Karaj, Kermanshah, Tabriz, and Isfahan, where a major nuclear facility is located. (TIME: How the World Is Reacting to the Attack on Iran, February 28, 2026)

How Jewish Leaders and Communities Responded

The timing — an attack on the land of ancient Persia on the eve of Purim — immediately generated religious and political commentary across the Jewish world.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu made the Purim parallel explicit in his first statement after the beginning of the war: "Twenty-five hundred years ago, in ancient Persia, a tyrant rose against us with the very same goal, to utterly

destroy our people. Today as well, on Purim, the lot has fallen, and in the end this evil regime will fall too." (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)

The Orthodox Union issued a statement titled "Purim in Our Time: Standing Up to Iranian Tyranny," declaring: "We will read the Bible story of Esther and Mordecai overcoming the genocidal plans of Haman, who sought to destroy the Jewish people. Today, in coordination with Prime Minister Netanyahu and the IDF, President Trump and the U.S. armed forces took defensive action to silence a modern threat from the same ancestral land of Haman." (The Jewish Star, March 4, 2026) The Agudath Israel of America, the Zionist Organization of America, Religious Zionists of America, and B'nai B'rith International all issued similarly supportive statements, most making explicit Purim comparisons.

In Beit Shemesh, an Iranian missile killed nine people sheltering in a bomb shelter that doubled as a synagogue. A widely circulated image showed shrapnel from the missile penetrating a Torah scroll at exactly the passage read on Shabbat Zachor — the commandment to "blot out the memory of Amalek." For many Orthodox commentators, this was not coincidence but providential significance. (JTA, March 2, 2026)

Some commentators were more triumphant than reverential. Digital creator Evan Pickus wrote: "The evil Persian Prime Minister [sic], who issued a promise to kill all the Jews, destroyed on the same day as his ancestor... I honestly believe our leaders planned it this way, and I love that." Rabbi Simon Jacobson of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement said: "The goal, of course, is to eradicate the enemy in every possible way, exactly as it happened in Persia, 2400 years ago in the story of Purim."

Ron Halber, CEO of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, was more measured: "This holiday, we celebrate how the Jews were able to throw off the yoke of oppression. The irony is that Purim focuses on what was happening to the Jewish community in Persia, which is today modern-day Iran." (WJLA News, March 3, 2026)

The Jewish Peace Community's Response

The progressive Jewish community responded with alarm and grief. J Street CEO Jeremy Ben-Ami stated: "We are appalled by President Trump's reckless decision to launch a war of choice against Iran explicitly seeking regime change." While acknowledging Iran's nuclear program and regional proxy

activities as real security concerns, Ben-Ami said Iran didn't present an immediate threat justifying preventive war.

Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) published a statement on February 28 titled "No War with Iran": "Jewish Voice for Peace denounces the immoral and illegal war on Iran launched by the United States and Israel last night. These attacks expand the endless wars that could destroy the lives of tens of millions of people. We stand in solidarity with the people of Iran and against the U.S. and Israeli government's imperial warmongering... Democracy cannot be claimed, nor the freedom of people won, through the continuation of imperial wars, military assaults and foreign interventions." (Jewish Voice for Peace, February 28, 2026)

IfNotNow posted: "The people of Iran are experiencing a brutal US-Israeli bombing campaign. US-made bombs have already struck schools in Iran, killing children and other civilians." (The Jewish Star, March 4, 2026) Jewish Voice for Liberation in the UK condemned "the coordinated US-Israeli bombing campaign against Iran and the UK government's decision to allow its territory to be used in the attack." (Jewish Voice for Liberation, March 5, 2026)

Rabbi Michelle Dardashti of Kane Street Synagogue in Brooklyn, whose father had left Iran as a young man, offered perhaps the most theologically nuanced response: "Purim pushes us to contend with the gray — to recognize how quickly roles can flip; how, on a dime, individuals and nations can shift from victim to aggressor, from righteous to morally compromised, or into categories that resist easy labels altogether... Anyone who tells you with certainty that this war with Iran will unquestionably be good for the Jews and good for the world, that it will surely end well or end quickly — I would be wary of heeding that voice." (JTA, March 2, 2026)

Muslim World and International Reaction

Russia called the attack "a pre-planned and unprovoked act of armed aggression against a sovereign and independent U.N. member state," warning of potential "humanitarian, economic and possibly radiological catastrophe." Oman's Foreign Minister, a key mediator in U.S.-Iran nuclear talks, said he was "dismayed": "Active and serious negotiations have yet again been undermined. Neither the interests of the United States nor the cause of global peace are well served by this." Spain's Prime Minister called for

"immediate de-escalation," rejecting "the unilateral military action by the United States and Israel." Pakistan condemned the attacks. France, Germany, and the UK — in a joint statement — urged Iran to resume negotiations. (TIME: World Reactions, February 28, 2026)

The Troubling Irony

The profound and troubling irony of the timing deserves direct statement: on the Jewish holiday celebrating Jewish survival in ancient Persia — the very land that is now Iran — the United States and Israel launched a military campaign against modern Iran that has already killed thousands of Iranian civilians, including 175 children at a girls' elementary school near a military base, according to early reports. The holiday that commemorates a queen who saved her people through courage and moral clarity was invoked by political and military leaders to justify a campaign of aerial bombardment that is, by any objective standard, killing the descendants of the very Persians among whom the Purim story is set.

There is something deeply instructive in the contrast between the triumphalist invocations of Purim by political leaders and the warnings of progressive rabbis and Jewish peace organizations. The Book of Esther, as careful readers note, ends not with simple liberation but with mass killing — the Jews, once under threat, are granted the right to kill their enemies, and thousands die. The holiday has always contained within it this darker possibility: that the victim, given power, becomes the aggressor. Rabbi Dardashti's warning — "how quickly roles can flip; how, on a dime, individuals and nations can shift from victim to aggressor" — is not a condemnation but a reading of the very text being celebrated. The ancient Persians were not Haman. The Iranian people — who have risen in protest against their own government for decades, who have been killed by the thousands by their own regime, and who are now being bombed by the country that destroyed their democracy in 1953 — deserve better than to be cast as villains in someone else's religious narrative.

Timeline of Events, February 28–March 6, 2026

The origins of the war predate its official start by months — and the critical thread is the lobbying campaign by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

December 2025: Netanyahu visits Trump at Mar-a-Lago and first raises the prospect of striking Iran's missile sites.

February 11, 2026: Netanyahu was ushered into the White House with minimal fanfare, away from the press. After an initial meeting in the Cabinet Room, he was taken downstairs to the Situation Room — a venue the *New York Times* noted is "seldom utilized for face-to-face discussions with foreign dignitaries." Netanyahu sat directly opposite Trump. On the screen behind him appeared David Barnea, the head of Mossad, flanked by Israeli military officials — a visual arrangement of a wartime leader flanked by his intelligence and military command. Also in the room: Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, Joint Chiefs Chairman General Caine, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, chief of staff Susie Wiles, Jared Kushner, and special envoy Steve Witkoff. Netanyahu had been advocating for months for the United States to consent to a significant military operation against Iran. The two discussed possible attack dates and the "slim prospects for a diplomatic solution." Tucker Carlson had met with Trump three times to argue against military action, warning Trump he "should not be boxed in by Israel." These voices were overruled. (New York Times, April 7, 2026: "How Trump Took the U.S. to War With Iran")

February 22–27: Three rounds of nuclear negotiations in Geneva concluded with Oman reporting "significant progress." Iran reportedly proposed a "years-long pause on enrichment" with "broad verification measures."

February 23: Netanyahu called Trump to inform him of Supreme Leader Khamenei's upcoming meeting location.

February 27: Two days after negotiations ended, Trump's envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner told Trump a deal was "out of reach."

February 27, 3:38 PM EST: Trump issued the final go order: *"Operation Epic Fury is approved. No aborts. Good luck."*

February 28, 2026 (Saturday, when Congress was not in session): Operation Epic Fury commenced. U.S. and Israeli forces struck Iran's missile infrastructure, air defense systems, naval facilities, and nuclear sites. More than 1,000 targets were struck in the first 48 hours. Supreme Leader Ali

Khamenei was killed in the opening hours. Forty-nine senior Iranian military and political leaders were killed.

On the same day — **the first day of strikes** — the Shajareh Tayyebeh Girls' Elementary School in Minab, Hormozgan Province, was struck three times during the school day (Saturday is a school day in Iran). Between 150 and 186 people were killed, predominantly girls aged 7 to 12. Satellite imagery verified the school had been physically separated from a nearby IRGC naval compound since at least 2016.

March 1, 2026: Six U.S. service members were killed in a single Iranian drone strike on a makeshift operations center at Shuaiba port, Kuwait. All four identified victims were members of the 103rd Sustainment Command, based in Des Moines, Iowa. Eighteen more were seriously wounded. Iran launched Operation True Promise IV, striking U.S. military assets across six Gulf states.

March 2: Gas prices jumped 11 cents overnight — the largest single-night increase since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The S&P 500 fell into negative territory for the year.

March 3: The CIA was reported to be arming Kurdish forces with the aim of fomenting a popular uprising in Iran. Trump personally called KDPI president Mustafa Hijri. IRGC Navy Commander Mohammad Akzade declared: "At this moment, the Strait of Hormuz is entirely under the control of the Navy of the Islamic Republic."

March 4, 2026: Senate voted **47-53** to block the Kaine-Paul War Powers resolution (S.J.Res.104) directing removal of U.S. forces from hostilities with Iran. Only Republican in favor: Rand Paul. Only Democrat opposed: John Fetterman. After the vote, Sen. Kaine said he would refile.

March 5, 2026: Deputy Defense Secretary Steve Feinberg finalized a supplemental budget request of approximately **$50 billion** to replenish consumed munitions. Meetings were convened with Raytheon, Lockheed Martin, and other defense contractors.

March 6, 2026 (the date of this document): Total U.S. cost through Day 4: more than **$5 billion**. Iran has launched 798 ballistic/naval missiles and 1,628 drones. The Penn Wharton Budget Model projects total economic impact up to **$210 billion**. Two additional schools near Tehran were struck.

The Human Cost: Death Toll and Destruction (as of March 6, 2026)

The numbers are preliminary. They will grow. But they must be stated.

According to Al Jazeera's live tracker, as of Thursday March 6:

Deaths: - **Iran**: 1,230 killed (Iran's semiofficial Tasnim news agency). The deadliest single incident: approximately 180 young girls killed in an Israeli strike on an elementary school in Minab, southeastern Iran. - **Lebanon**: 77 killed in Israeli attacks since Monday (Lebanese Health Ministry) - **Israel**: 11 killed (9 in Iranian ballistic missile strike on Beit Shemesh) - **United States**: 6 soldiers killed, 18 wounded (Pentagon confirmed) - **Kuwait**: 4 killed, including a child from shrapnel injuries - **UAE**: 3 killed (nationals of Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh) - **Iraq**: 2 killed (fighters at Jurf al-Sakher base) - **Bahrain**: 1 killed (worker from intercepted missile debris) - **Oman**: 1 killed (worker at Duqm port)

Injuries: Hundreds in Iran, hundreds in Israel; 527 in Lebanon; 78 in UAE; 35 in Kuwait; 16 in Qatar; others across the Gulf.

Scale of Destruction: The U.S. military has struck nearly **2,000 targets** inside Iran in six days (CENTCOM). Iran has fired on **27 U.S. bases** across nine countries and struck Israeli facilities in Tel Aviv. Iranian drones have reached Bahrain's international airport, Qatari energy facilities at Ras Laffan and Mesaieed, Saudi oil infrastructure, and a British base runway in Cyprus.

Economic Fallout — Qatar's Warning: Qatar's Energy Minister Saad al-Kaabi told the *Financial Times* that the war "will bring down the economies of the world." He warned of a "shutdown of all Gulf energy exporters" and predicted oil prices could hit **$150 per barrel** within two to three weeks if the Strait of Hormuz remains blocked — up from $87.60 at time of his statement. Gas prices are projected to double to $40 per million BTU. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have halted production at major oil and gas facilities. QatarEnergy has suspended operations. A fifth of the world's oil and gas passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Most Gulf entities are expected to declare force majeure within days. (Middle East Eye, March 6, 2026)

This war is one week old. The dead are already counted in the thousands. The economic damage is already measured in the hundreds of billions. And the

people making the decisions that produced this outcome — in Washington and Jerusalem — are not among the dead.

The Stated Reasons vs. the Real Reasons

To understand why this war happened, one framework comes from a Chinese-American geopolitical analyst known publicly as Professor Jiang of *Predictive History*, who had publicly predicted before the conflict that Trump would start a war with Iran. He offered three interlocking explanations:

Hubris: Early tactical successes — what Jiang compared to Hitler's early victories in Poland — create an adrenaline effect and overconfidence in American military supremacy. The tactical precision of Operation Epic Fury fed the delusion that precision would translate into strategic outcome.

Internal Political Calculus: The war benefits Trump personally through political support from Israel and Gulf states, and potentially provides mechanism to consolidate executive power. Emergency war powers have historically been used to expand presidential authority. Follow the power, not the patriotism.

The Script: There is a systemic institutional momentum — a predetermined trajectory — that persists independent of strategic sense for the nation. The machine runs itself. Advisers, military planners, defense contractors, intelligence agencies, allied governments — all have pre-existing plans for Iran that were waiting for political authorization. Once authorized, the machine executed the script.

Ellsberg identified the same dynamic in the Vietnam era: "I didn't know that Nixon actually expected to achieve this by the end of '69. And so he actually set November 3rd as his tentative internal date for carrying out an ultimatum." Plans that existed, waiting for implementation. The difference between 1969 and 2026 is primarily the delivery mechanism.

Netanyahu's Lobbying Campaign

The New York Times, drawing on interviews with U.S. and Israeli officials, diplomats, and intelligence figures, documented what amounts to a multi-

month lobbying campaign by Netanyahu to drag Trump into a war Netanyahu had long wanted but Israel could not execute alone.

The critical moment was the February 11 Situation Room briefing. The *New York Times* reported on April 7, 2026 that Netanyahu was not merely visiting the Oval Office — he was taken downstairs to the Situation Room, where Mossad chief David Barnea and Israeli military officials appeared on screen behind him. The Situation Room is not the Cabinet Room. It is not where you meet foreign dignitaries. You go to the Situation Room when you are conducting a classified military operation. A foreign leader and his spy chief were co-planning the war from inside America's most sensitive intelligence facility. Netanyahu argued against the Geneva negotiations that were already underway and showing genuine signs of progress: Iran had reportedly proposed a years-long enrichment pause. Two days after the final negotiating round ended, Witkoff and Kushner told Trump the deal was unreachable.

The Arms Control Association concluded: "The Trump administration did not engage in good-faith negotiations" and "did not exhaust diplomatic options" before striking.

The structural dynamic: Israel wanted Iran's missile program degraded. The U.S. provided the heavy airpower (B-2 bombers, carrier strike groups, Tomahawk missiles) that Israel lacks. Netanyahu provided political will and intelligence — including Khamenei's meeting location. The transaction was asymmetric in capability; the political debt ran the other way.

The March 5 War Powers Vote: 53–47

The War Powers Resolution of 1973 — enacted over Nixon's veto after Vietnam — requires the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of committing forces to hostilities and to withdraw forces within 60 days absent congressional authorization. The Trump administration briefed only the "Gang of Eight" congressional leaders before the strikes commenced — a briefing, not consultation — and disputed whether the 60-day clock was even triggered.

When Senators Kaine and Paul sponsored S.J.Res.104 to direct withdrawal from hostilities with Iran, the vote failed **47-53**. The 53-vote majority blocking the resolution consisted almost entirely of Republicans arguing the

strikes were "lawful and time-limited." Only Rand Paul crossed the aisle. Only John Fetterman crossed from the other direction.

Senator Jim Risch, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "This is not a forever war. This is going to end very quickly."

Senator Kaine's assessment of the legal landscape: the 60-day clock began February 28. Without authorization, forces must be withdrawn by late April 2026 under the War Powers Resolution — unless Congress acts.

The $50 Billion Supplemental and Who Profits

The supplemental request's primary purpose was munitions replenishment: Tomahawk cruise missiles at $2.2 million each; THAAD interceptors at $12.7 million each; Patriot PAC-3 missiles at $3.7 million each; SM-3 missiles. The key contractors:

- **Raytheon** (now RTX): manufactures Tomahawks, Patriots, SM-3s
- **Lockheed Martin**: manufactures THAAD
- **Boeing**: manufactures JDAM kits and certain munitions
- **Northrop Grumman**: involved in B-2 bomber operations

The stock prices of defense contractors rose as commercial markets fell. The $50 billion supplemental would be appropriated from the same federal budget from which domestic programs were simultaneously being cut. The Penn Wharton Budget Model projects the total economic impact of the war — including macroeconomic losses — at up to **$210 billion**. The direct military cost alone is projected at $65 billion.

The Center for American Progress put the proportionality in human terms: the first four days of Operation Epic Fury, at $5 billion, cost more than it would take to feed 2 million Americans through SNAP for an entire year. A single Tomahawk missile, at $2.2 million, represents the annual Medicaid coverage for 775 children, or 3,600 school lunches.

The Shah's Son: Reza Pahlavi and the 1953 Playbook

As U.S. and Israeli bombs fell on Iran on February 28, 2026, one face appeared repeatedly on Western media as the alternative to the Islamic Republic: Reza Pahlavi, the 65-year-old son of the Shah who was deposed in

the 1979 revolution. For supporters, he represents a secular democratic future for Iran. For critics — including many Iranians who oppose the Islamic Republic but distrust Pahlavi — his emergence as the West's chosen face of regime change recalls nothing so much as 1953: another Western-backed figure positioned to assume power in Tehran after foreign military intervention dismantled whatever government the Iranians had. The parallel is almost too neat — and it has not escaped the notice of Iranians who lived through, or who study, that history.

Who Is Reza Pahlavi?

Reza Pahlavi was born in Tehran in 1960 and was formally named Crown Prince at age 7 during his father's coronation ceremony. At 17, he became one of the youngest licensed military pilots in Iran and left for the U.S. to pursue advanced flight training. The 1979 revolution, which erupted while he was abroad, transformed what was supposed to be a temporary study trip into a 47-year exile. He has not returned to Iran since. He now lives in Maryland with his wife and three daughters. (The Forward, February 28, 2026)

Over the decades, Pahlavi has consistently positioned himself as a pro-democracy, secular opposition leader who does not seek to restore the monarchy — he says — but to serve as a transitional leader who would hand power to a democratically elected parliament after the Islamic Republic's collapse. His main organizational vehicle is the National Union for Democracy in Iran (NUFDI), a Washington-based organization that has advocated regime change in Iran with Pahlavi's backing. Under NUFDI, Pahlavi developed the "Iran Prosperity Project," a governance blueprint for post-Islamic Republic transition.

US Officials and the Neoconservative Network

Pahlavi's meetings with senior U.S. officials represent a significant escalation. In January 2026, as massive anti-regime protests swept through Iran and thousands of protesters were killed by regime forces, White House envoy Steve Witkoff — Trump's top Middle East adviser — held a secret meeting with Pahlavi. This represented, according to Axios, "the first high-level meeting between the Trump administration and the Iranian opposition" since the protests began. (Fox News, January 13, 2026) Trump had told Iranian protesters on Truth Social: "HELP IS ON ITS WAY."

In February 2026, Pahlavi addressed the Munich Security Conference — attended by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Senator Lindsey Graham, and other senior Western officials — and outlined his five-pillar plan for democratic transition: maximum pressure, maximum support (from international allies), maximum defections, maximum mobilization, and a post-regime vision. He declared February 14 a "Global Day of Action," and claimed that over a million Iranians participated in diaspora rallies. (ABC Australia, February 26, 2026)

Pahlavi is openly pro-Israel. He has traveled to Israel, prayed at the Western Wall, met with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and advocates for what he calls "Cyrus Accords" between Israel and a future Iran — a formal alliance modeled on the Abraham Accords. He describes Israel and Iran as "the only two countries on this planet that can claim to have a biblical relationship." (The Forward, February 28, 2026)

On February 28, 2026 — the day U.S. and Israeli forces began bombing Iran — Pahlavi appeared on Fox News' *Sunday Morning Futures*, calling the strikes "the beginning of the very end of the regime" and "the game changer we've been waiting for all this time." He declared: "This is like full decapitation of the regime, and ultimately what will expedite its total collapse." (Fox News, March 1, 2026) He also posted a video on X encouraging Iranian security forces to defect and telling the Iranian people he would "announce to you precisely" when they "can return to the streets for the final action."

The Historical Parallel to 1953

The parallel to 1953 is explicit and has been widely noted. In 1953, the CIA overthrew Mossadegh and restored the Shah — Pahlavi's father — to power using manufactured crowds, bribed officials, and a military coup. Today, the U.S. and Israel are attempting to destroy the Islamic Republic through aerial bombardment, hoping that regime collapse will create a power vacuum that Pahlavi can fill. USC professor and former CIA analyst Gregory Treverton noted directly on March 3, 2026: "A covert U.S. campaign in the mid-20th century helped steer Iran toward the intense anti-American sentiment that has distinguished its government policy for decades... As journalist Fareed Zakaria put it, 'Bomb and hope' is not a strategy." (USC Dornsife, March 3, 2026)

Skepticism About His Support Inside Iran

Despite widespread diaspora support and his name being chanted in protest videos, serious analysts are deeply skeptical about Pahlavi's actual political base inside Iran. A Politico analysis published four days before the bombing — on February 24, 2026 — was headlined "Why Iranians Are Increasingly Willing to Settle for Reza Pahlavi," and it led with the observation that U.S. officials themselves told the author that Pahlavi's lack of a "ground game inside Iran" was a "fair suspicion." (Politico, February 24, 2026) Suzanne Maloney of the Brookings Institution commented: "The way he runs his organization says something about the way he might run a country."

Arash Azizi, a research associate at Yale, told Newsweek that Pahlavi "lacks any substantial organization, both outside Iran and especially within the country" and that his strategy appeared to hinge entirely on U.S. and Israeli military action to create a vacuum he could occupy. "Even then, I see very little chance he can find a pathway to power in Iran." (Newsweek, March 2, 2026) Alireza Nader, who had previously supported Pahlavi, said: "His political agenda has shifted significantly since I initially backed him. I'm concerned that the movement surrounding him is becoming increasingly radical and appealing to a limited segment of Iranian society."

Critics within the Iranian opposition have noted that Pahlavi's aides have reportedly used aggressive online tactics to silence dissent, that he publicly criticizes Democrats while endorsing Trump and the Republican Party, and that his proposed transition plan would concentrate significant power in his own hands for an undefined period before elections. The question asked about Khomeini in 1979 — will the transitional leader actually transition, or will he consolidate? — is being asked again about Pahlavi in 2026. History counsels caution: the last person to promise a temporary caretaker role in revolutionary Iran never stepped down.

PART IV: THE SMART BOMB TRAP AND THE MILITARY REALITY

Robert Pape's Full Thesis and the Century of Evidence

Robert Pape is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and the author of *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (1996). He has advised every White House from 2001 to 2024 on national security, counseled Air Force leaders on concluding the Bosnian War, and briefed Congress on Afghanistan. He launched his Substack, *The Escalation Trap*, on February 25, 2026, explicitly in response to the building confrontation with Iran. His first essay, "The Illusion of Control," published on February 28 — the same morning Operation Epic Fury commenced.

His core thesis, stated in a *Time Magazine* interview published March 4, 2026:

> "For over a century, states — including the United States, European states, Russia, and Israel — have tried to topple regimes with air power alone. It has never — and I'm choosing my words carefully — it has never worked."

His essay "The Air Power Illusion" (March 3, 2026) documents the mechanism:

> "In war after war, cities have burned, infrastructure has collapsed, leaders have been targeted from the sky. Yet no regime in modern history has fallen solely because it was bombed from the air. In international politics, 100 percent patterns are rare. But here the record is uniform."

Why air power alone fails — Pape's three mechanisms:

1. **The three-player dynamic**: Before airstrikes, it is a two-player game: regime versus an often-divided society. External bombing creates a third actor, injecting nationalism that was previously absent. Moderates lose oxygen. Security institutions consolidate authority. "Iran first" replaces factional competition. The bombing fuses regime and people.
2. **Elite survival calculus**: Under foreign air attack, insiders who collaborate with the invader — who hand over the country's assets

— "face a bullet in the head." Shared external threat *binds* elites together. This is the opposite of the intended effect.

3. **Regimes fall from ground defeat, not aerial punishment**: The Tsarist regime collapsed in WWI because its army disintegrated from catastrophic battlefield losses, not because cities were bombed. "Soldiers turned against the regime that had led them into disaster."

The Smart Bomb Trap — Defined

From Pape's February 27 Substack post:

> "The trap does not lie in technology. The bombs work. GPS is accurate. The targets are destroyed. The trap lies in the false assumption that precision at the tactical level automatically produces control at the strategic level."

The Kosovo parallel is instructive. On March 24, 1999, NATO launched 51 carefully selected strikes around Belgrade, expecting rapid compliance from Milošević. Within days, Serbian ground forces accelerated operations in Kosovo. By late spring, 800,000 to one million Kosovar Albanians — nearly half the population — had been driven from their homes. The bombing *accelerated* the humanitarian catastrophe it was designed to prevent.

It took 78 days of bombing, expanded target lists, an accidental Chinese embassy strike, and the credible preparation of a NATO ground invasion — with tens of thousands of troops massing in Albania and Macedonia — before Milošević accepted terms. Pape's conclusion: "This was the worst-case scenario the air campaign had been designed to prevent."

Applied to Iran: the scale of the problem is incomparably greater. Iran has 92 million people (vs. Yugoslavia's 10 million). It has an underground missile network with proven three-level delegation of command authority. It has 408 kg of enriched uranium in unknown locations. It has proxy networks across seven countries. It has a Shia theological framework that transforms martyrdom into resistance.

As Pape wrote in *New York Magazine*:

> "Enter the Escalation Trap: Doubling down becomes the substitute for reassessment. Target lists expand. Strike tempo increases. Thresholds against costly options like ground forces subtly shift. Each incremental step is justified as the final push required to produce the collapse that was expected at the outset. But the underlying mechanism has not changed."

Iran's Military Capabilities

Iran fields approximately **610,000 active-duty personnel** — among the world's top 20 militaries by size and capability. The relevant forces for this conflict:

Branch	Personnel
Regular Army	350,000–420,000
IRGC	190,000
IRGC Navy	18,000
Air Force	37,000
Basij (active; mobilizable: 600,000)	90,000
Total Active	**~610,000**
Reserves	**~350,000**

The **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)** is not simply a military branch — it is a political-military-economic empire that answers directly to the Supreme Leader, controls Iran's missile and drone arsenals, and manages the regional "Axis of Resistance" proxy network across Lebanon (Hezbollah), Gaza, Yemen (Houthis), Iraq (PMF militias), and Syria.

Critically, the IRGC's response to Operation Epic Fury has been to *decentralize*, not collapse. Reuters reported on March 4, 2026 that the IRGC has delegated command authority three ranks deep — a doctrine drawn explicitly from lessons learned watching Iraq's military collapse in 2003.

Deputy Defense Minister Reza Talaeinik stated on television: "The structure of each unit and section has been arranged so that if a commander is killed, a successor is ready to step in immediately."

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi confirmed after Khamenei's killing: "These units are acting based on general directives provided to them in advance, rather than through direct, real-time control from the current political leadership."

The missile arsenal: Prior to the June 2025 strikes, Iran's ballistic missile inventory was estimated at 2,500–3,000 missiles. The current inventory, after replenishment from Chinese sodium perchlorate purchases, is estimated at 1,000–1,500 missiles. As of March 5, Iran had already launched 798 ballistic/naval missiles and 1,628 drones — depleting perhaps half the degraded missile arsenal in one week. Yet Iran's industrial capacity for drone production is the real strategic variable.

Underground "missile cities": Iran has built an extensive network of underground facilities beneath the Zagros and Alborz mountains — some estimated at 500 meters deep, beyond the penetration depth of most U.S. bunker-busters (the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator reaches approximately 60 meters). These facilities include rail-mounted missile systems, fiber optic communications (no electronic signatures), self-sustaining garrisons, and underground drone bases. Western intelligence agencies have no precise maps of these networks.

The Fatal Cost Asymmetry

The single most decisive strategic fact of the 2026 Iran conflict is economic:

Weapon	Unit Cost
Shahed-136 drone (Iran)	$20,000–$50,000
Patriot PAC-3 interceptor (U.S.)	~$4,000,000
THAAD interceptor (U.S.)	~$12,700,000
Cost asymmetry ratio	**80:1 to 360:1**

Iran launched over 2,000 drones in the first week. If each was intercepted by Patriot missiles: **$8 billion in U.S. interceptors expended**. Iran's cost: roughly $70 million. Iran can manufacture hundreds more drones per week. U.S. and allied interceptor stockpiles are finite, their replenishment slow.

CSIS defense analyst Patrycja Bazylczyk: "The Shahed-136, along with other UAVs, provides nations like Russia and Iran an economical means to impose disproportionate costs, compelling adversaries to expend costly interceptors on low-cost targets."

The tactical doctrine is deliberate: deploy drones first to exhaust air defense interceptor stockpiles and psychological endurance, reserving ballistic missiles for later phases.

Leadership Decapitation: Why Killing Khamenei Made Things Worse

History provides a consistent lesson: the assassination of national leaders rarely produces the political outcomes intended. Gaddafi's death in 2011 produced a failed state and a slave trade. Saddam's execution in 2006 galvanized Sunni resistance and intensified sectarian civil war. Qasem Soleimani's assassination in January 2020 accelerated Iran's nuclear program, injured 109 U.S. service members in retaliatory strikes, killed 176 people on a Ukrainian airliner, and drove Iraq to demand the expulsion of U.S. troops.

The killing of Supreme Leader Khamenei on February 28, 2026 is categorically different from all prior cases because of its intersection with **Shia theology**.

The theological roots of Shia Islam's reverence for martyrdom trace to the **Battle of Karbala (680 AD)**, when Hussain ibn Ali — grandson of the Prophet Muhammad — was slain refusing to swear allegiance to an unjust ruler. Every year on Ashura, Shia Muslims worldwide commemorate Hussain's death. The parallels between Karbala and Khamenei's killing are immediate and visceral: a Supreme Leader — the successor to Khomeini, the embodiment of the Islamic Republic's spiritual authority — killed by external enemies **during the holy month of Ramadan**.

Florida International University professor Eric Lob writes: "Martyrdom has held a central place among Shiites. In Iran and other parts of the Muslim world, contemporary politics is often framed in this seventh-century language of moral resistance."

The formal religious response was swift. Within 24 hours, two Grand Ayatollahs issued fatwas:

- **Grand Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani**: declared all Muslims are "religiously obliged to avenge Khamenei's death"
- **Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi**: described retaliation as "a religious duty for Muslims worldwide 'until the evil of these criminals is eradicated from the world'"

Among the approximately **200 million Shia Muslims worldwide**, Khamenei's killing as Supreme Leader during Ramadan, at the hands of an external power, triggers the deepest theological framework of righteous resistance — regardless of their opinions of his governance. This is a geopolitical effect that no precision strike can calculate in advance.

CIA Arming Kurds: The Next Vietnam?

On March 3, 2026, CNN reported that the CIA was working to arm Kurdish forces with the aim of fomenting a popular uprising in Iran. Trump personally called KDPI president Mustafa Hijri the same day.

Iranian Kurdish forces — comprising thousands of personnel across factions including the KDPI — operate along the Iraq-Iran border within Iraqi Kurdistan. The strategy: Kurdish forces enter western Iran, pin down IRGC security forces, creating zones where unarmed Iranians in urban centers could mobilize without facing mass crackdowns.

Former senior Pentagon official Ben Plitsas characterized it as "a U.S. plan for a protracted sense of civil war ultimately in Iran."

The fundamental problems acknowledged by U.S. officials: - Iranian Kurds constitute approximately **10% of Iran's population** — insufficient for a decisive uprising - U.S. intelligence assessments "persistently suggested that Iranian Kurdish groups lack the influence or resources necessary to support a successful uprising" - Kurdish groups are divided by competing ideologies and histories of internal conflict - Iraq's national security adviser stated: "Iraq will not permit groups to infiltrate or cross the Iranian border to conduct terrorist activities from Iraqi territory"

The Ahmad Chalabi comparison is unavoidable. The 2003 Iraq invasion was built partly on the premise that Iraqi exiles — Chalabi's Iraqi National

Congress — would provide political legitimacy for a post-Saddam government. They had no domestic constituency. The parallel with Iranian Kurdish exile groups is precise.

PART V: FOLLOW THE MONEY

The Petrodollar System and Why Iran Is a Target

To understand why Iran is a persistent target of American hostility — through four administrations, across three decades — one must understand the architecture of dollar hegemony.

In 1971, President Nixon ended dollar convertibility to gold, collapsing the Bretton Woods system. The dollar plummeted. The 1973 OPEC embargo quadrupled oil prices. The solution was engineered by Treasury Secretary William Simon in a secret May 1974 mission to Riyadh:

> "In exchange for American military assistance and continued oil purchases, the Saudis would funnel their oil money into U.S. Treasury bonds, which they would be permitted to buy in secret outside the normal auctions. Simon had secured a commitment by a foreign country to finance American deficits — and the petrodollar was born." — Politico

The mechanism works through a simple but powerful structure:

Mechanism	Effect
Global oil priced in USD	Every nation must hold dollar reserves to buy energy
Petrodollar recycling	Oil exporters reinvest surpluses in U.S. Treasuries, funding American deficits
"Exorbitant Privilege"	U.S. can run structural trade/budget deficits without hyperinflationary penalty
Dollar as reserve currency	~89% of global FX transactions denominated in USD (BIS data, 2025)

Iran has been among the most persistent actors in undermining this architecture. Since at least 2010, Iran has sold oil for yuan to Chinese "teapot" refineries in Shandong province. By 2024, it joined BRICS — which now includes UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. Iran participates in mBridge, a multi-CBDC cross-border payment system that by early 2026 had surpassed $55 billion in transaction volume, enabling near-instant settlement entirely bypassing SWIFT.

The Petrodollar War Thesis holds that the pattern of U.S. military action against dollar-defecting states is too consistent to be coincidental:

Country	Dollar Defection	U.S. Response
Iraq (2000)	Saddam switches oil-for-food to euros	2003 invasion; oil reverts to USD
Libya (2011)	Gaddafi proposes pan-African gold dinar	NATO intervention; Gaddafi killed
Venezuela	Promotes oil trade outside dollar	Intensifying sanctions; Maduro captured January 2026
Iran	Oil-for-yuan trade, BRICS, mBridge	SWIFT exclusion; escalating sanctions; 2025–2026 military strikes

Quiver Quantitative and mainstream economists offer counter-arguments: correlation is not causation; dollar dominance has multiple pillars beyond oil pricing; Saudi Arabia itself joined mBridge while remaining a U.S. ally. These are legitimate objections. The most honest assessment: the petrodollar motivation is real but likely one factor among several — not a monocausal explanation but a structural incentive that consistently converges with other motivations.

What cannot be disputed: every U.S. adversary that has attempted to price oil outside the dollar has faced severe U.S. pressure or military action. The pattern is too consistent to dismiss.

Update — April 2026: The Stablecoin Petrodollar

The petrodollar is no longer just oil priced in dollars. It's oil *tolled* in dollar-pegged stablecoins.

According to Bloomberg, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps now collects transit tolls from tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz — paid in USDT (Tether's dollar-pegged stablecoin) on the Tron blockchain, settling in under three seconds. Rates start at one dollar per barrel and can reach two million dollars per supertanker. Once payment confirms, a VHF passcode is issued and an IRGC patrol boat escorts the vessel through the Larak corridor.

This is not a workaround. It's infrastructure at industrial scale. Chainalysis reported the IRGC moved **$3 billion** through cryptocurrency in 2025, with IRGC-linked wallets accounting for over fifty percent of all Iranian crypto activity by Q4 2025. TRM Labs traced approximately **$1 billion** in IRGC flows through two UK-registered exchanges — Zedcex and Zedxion — operating almost entirely in USDT on Tron. TRM described it as "a sanctioned military organization operating exchange-branded crypto infrastructure offshore." OFAC designated both exchanges on January 30, 2026. Twenty-nine days later, the bombing began.

Iran's Central Bank held **$507 million** in USDT according to blockchain analytics firm Elliptic — reserves already in place before the current conflict. In January 2026, Iran's Ministry of Defence began accepting cryptocurrency for arms exports: drones, missiles, and defense equipment, all settled on the same blockchain rails.

The structural implication is staggering: the US Treasury issues bonds to fund its war effort against Iran. Those bonds finance aircraft carriers, interceptors, and the 2,400 sorties flown in five weeks. Meanwhile, USDT — a token bearing "USD" on its face, registered in the British Virgin Islands, backed by those same US Treasuries — funds toll payments on the opposing side. One rail runs through the Federal Reserve. The other runs through a BVI-registered blockchain. Both settle in seconds. Both reference the same dollar.

Analyst Shanaka Anslem Perera called it "the first conflict in history where an enemy's currency funds both sides."

The petrodollar has not been replaced. It has been forked. Both sides now run on the same currency through different infrastructure — and the GENIUS Act, the federal stablecoin law currently moving through Congress, would

make this arrangement permanent by legalizing the offshore stablecoin architecture that enables it.

(Sources: Bloomberg, April 1, 2026; Chainalysis; TRM Labs; Elliptic; OFAC designations January 30, 2026; BlockEden.xyz)

The Cost of War: From $5 Billion to $210 Billion

Operation Epic Fury costs through March 6, 2026:

Metric	Figure	Source
First 24 hours	$779 million	Anadolu Agency/NDTV
Through Day 4	>$5 billion	Center for American Progress
Pentagon estimate	~$1 billion/ day	Iran-Cost-Ticker.com / WSJ
Missile defense (Day 1-2)	>$10 billion	Defense Priorities estimate
Direct budgetary cost (range)	$40–$95 billion	Penn Wharton Budget Model
Total economic impact (range)	$40–$210 billion	Penn Wharton Budget Model
$50 billion supplemental request	~$50 billion	Reuters, Bloomberg Government

The $50 billion supplemental request — for munitions replenishment alone — arrives in a moment when the Trump administration was simultaneously cutting domestic programs. The juxtaposition:

Program	Annual Cost	War Comparison
Universal free college	$58 billion/year	Less than projected direct war cost

Program	Annual Cost	War Comparison
Medicare for All (savings)	Saves $438–$450 billion/year	Net savings, per Yale/ Lancet (Galvani, 2020)
Lives saved (Medicare for All)	68,000 deaths/ year prevented	Conservative estimate
SNAP for 2M Americans	~$5 billion/year	First 4 days of Epic Fury

For historical context: the Brown University Costs of War Project calculated post-9/11 wars cost **$8 trillion through 2022** — including $2.2 trillion reserved for veterans' care through 2050. Afghanistan alone: $2.3 trillion. Iraq: $1.9–$3 trillion by some estimates. These wars were entirely debt-financed. No American paid higher taxes for them. The debt compounds. The veterans' disability costs peak around 2030–2040.

How the War Hits American Families

Gas prices: Jumped 11 cents overnight on March 2 — the largest single-night increase since Russia's Ukraine invasion. By March 4, the national average reached $3.20/gallon, up ~20 cents in two days. At $100/barrel oil, analysts project U.S. gasoline at ~$3.50/gallon or higher.

Stock markets: The S&P 500 fell 1.6% on March 3, dropping into negative territory for the year. Nearly 90% of S&P 500 stocks fell. Asian markets: South Korea's Kospi plunged 7.2%. Germany's DAX fell 3.6%.

Treasury yields: Rose to 4.107% — above the key 4% threshold — indicating inflation fears overpowered flight-to-safety demand. A counter-intuitive move that signals stagflationary risk: the Fed cannot fight inflation and recession simultaneously.

Groceries: Shipping cost escalation and rising natural gas prices (used in fertilizer and food processing) create dual shocks to food supply chains.

Retirement accounts: Sustained market declines create permanent losses for retirees taking required minimum distributions — unable to defer withdrawals during market downturns.

Mortgages: With 10-year Treasury yields rising, fixed mortgage rates follow. Every basis point of increased yield adds costs to American homebuyers and refinancers.

The Strait of Hormuz — 21 miles wide at its narrowest — carries roughly 15–17 million barrels of crude oil per day, approximately 20% of global oil and 30% of seaborne crude. It also carries approximately 20% of global LNG exports. On March 2–4, only 5–15% of normal tanker traffic was navigating the Strait. The economic consequences of sustained closure would be catastrophic:

A 30-day full closure would mean approximately 200 million barrels of lost Middle Eastern crude production in March alone, pushing Brent crude to $100–$120 per barrel (J.P. Morgan projection), adding 0.6–0.7 percentage points to global inflation, and exhausting U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve capacity within 27 days.

What $300+ Billion in Israel Aid Could Have Built Instead

Since 1951, the United States has provided Israel cumulative aid of:

- **$305.4 billion** (inflation-adjusted): OpenTheBooks.com, June 2025
- **$330 billion** (constant 2024$): Council on Foreign Relations, October 2025
- **$352 billion** (constant 2025$): Polygraph/Semler, January 2026 — the most comprehensive estimate

For context: one year of this cumulative funding could have provided universal healthcare to all Americans for two years (Medicare for All would *save* $450 billion annually, net), or funded free four-year college for every American for five years, or rebuilt every public school in the United States.

The $6 billion the U.S. spent defending Israeli territory against Iranian counterattacks in April 2024, October 2024, and June 2025 is *not* included in the aid figure — it was direct U.S. military expenditure.

Techno-Feudalism: The Cloudalists and the War Machine

Yanis Varoufakis — former Greek Finance Minister and author of *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (2023) — offers the framework that connects surveillance capitalism to military power:

> "Markets, the medium of capitalism, have been replaced by cloud fiefs — digital trading platforms like amazon.com or Alibaba which look like, but are not, markets. And profit — the fuel of capitalism — has been replaced by its feudal predecessor: rent."

The numbers: - Apple App Store charges **30% of all in-app revenue** from developers — "a 30 percent ground rent paid to Apple on all their revenues" - Amazon Marketplace takes **more than 50% of seller revenue** (up from ~35% in 2016) - Amazon Web Services + Microsoft Azure + Google Cloud = **67% of global cloud computing market**

The connection to war: cloudalists require military protection for their global operations. The military requires cloudalist surveillance infrastructure, data processing, and communications systems. Defense contractors sit on tech company boards. The result is what could be termed a **military-surveillance-energy complex** in which: - Cloud platforms provide targeting intelligence and logistics optimization - Energy markets (controlled by petrodollar architecture) fund both sectors - State power enforces intellectual property regimes that prevent competitive infrastructure

Elon Musk's trajectory is the paradigmatic case: Tesla, SpaceX, Twitter (now X), Starlink, Neuralink, and DOGE access to federal computing systems. As Varoufakis observed: "He's even melded his wires within the federal government's computing systems, and his quasi, maybe fully-fledged fascist ideology goes hand in hand with that."

Peter Thiel — co-founder of Palantir Technologies, whose core business is providing data and surveillance support to military and intelligence agencies — explicitly argued that "capitalism is incompatible with democracy." Palantir holds contracts with the U.S. Army, Air Force, CIA, NSA, and allied intelligence agencies.

Varoufakis's most provocative geopolitical claim: the U.S.-China rivalry is fundamentally a **contest between cloudalist blocs**. Applied to Iran: Iran's embrace of BRICS, mBridge, and yuan-oil settlements represents an attempt to escape Western cloudalist financial infrastructure — threatening not just the petrodollar but the entire architecture of Western digital-financial dominance.

Update — April 2026: The Stablecoin as Both Weapon and Escape Route

The techno-feudal framework now has a concrete, operational case study: the stablecoin.

As documented in the petrodollar update above, the IRGC has built a functioning toll system at the Strait of Hormuz that settles in USDT on the Tron blockchain — $3 billion in crypto flows in 2025 alone, fifty percent of all Iranian crypto activity, with the Central Bank holding $507 million in USDT reserves. Iran's Ministry of Defence accepts crypto for arms exports. The dollar-pegged stablecoin has become the IRGC's financial infrastructure.

But here is Varoufakis's point made operational: the same stablecoin that liberates Iran from American banking infrastructure is also the ultimate enforcement tool for American power — when Washington chooses to use it.

In January 2026, Tether froze **$182 million** in USDT linked to Venezuela in a single day — the largest single freeze in stablecoin history. No court order. No due process. One company, registered in the British Virgin Islands, decided who keeps their money and who doesn't. The tokens were frozen on-chain, instantly and irreversibly. Tether's compliance team — the T3 Financial Crime Unit — acted on intelligence coordination with US law enforcement.

This is the kill switch. Tether can freeze any wallet, anywhere, at any time. The technology that lets the IRGC collect tolls outside American banking systems is the same technology that lets a BVI-registered company seize $182 million from Venezuela with a keystroke.

The paradox reveals the structure: Iran's $3 billion in IRGC crypto flows has not been frozen. Venezuela's $182 million was. The kill switch is selective. It is not governed by law — it is governed by the relationship between Tether

and the US government. Cooperate, and the stablecoin is your lifeline. Cross the wrong line, and it's your noose.

This is Varoufakis's cloud fief in its purest form. Tether is not a bank. It is not a government. It is a private entity extracting rent from $140 billion in deposits, paying zero to depositors, answering to no banking regulator, operating from a P.O. box in Tortola — and holding the power to financially execute any wallet holder on earth with a single transaction. That is not a market. That is a fief.

And the GENIUS Act, currently moving through Congress, would make it permanent.

The Structural Convergence: Why No One Can Shut It Down

The question this raises: are the two sides in cahoots? Did the US and Iran build this stablecoin architecture together?

No. And that's precisely what makes it unstoppable.

BCCI — the Cayman Islands bank that moved money for Iran-Contra in the 1980s — wasn't a conspiracy between the CIA and Iran. It was an infrastructure that both sides found independently because it served both their interests. The CIA needed to move money without congressional oversight. Iran needed to receive arms payments outside the embargo. BCCI sat in the middle. Nobody planned the convergence. The architecture produced it.

Stablecoins are doing the same thing forty years later. The US didn't build USDT for Iran. Iran didn't help design it. But when you create a dollar-pegged token that operates outside the banking system, you've created a tool that the dollar's defenders and the dollar's enemies will both use — because it IS the dollar, just on different plumbing. The US side benefits because Tether creates demand for Treasuries and extends dollar dominance into digital rails. The Iran side benefits because USDT bypasses SWIFT and enables toll collection, arms purchases, and sanctions evasion.

Neither side coordinated. The architecture generated the convergence automatically. A conspiracy can be exposed and prosecuted. A structural convergence can't. Nobody's guilty because nobody planned it. But the outcome is identical — both sides profit from the same instrument while killing each other with the money it generates.

The architecture doesn't require its enemies to cooperate. It generates cooperation between them automatically. That's more powerful than a conspiracy and harder to stop than a crime. You can arrest a conspirator. You can't arrest a structure.

This is Varoufakis's techno-feudalism at its most lethal. The cloud fief doesn't pick sides. It extracts from all of them.

(Sources: Bloomberg, April 1, 2026; Chainalysis; TRM Labs; Elliptic; Tether T3 FCU; OFAC; BlockEden.xyz)

PART VI: THE LEGAL CASE — THIS WAR IS ILLEGAL

Constitutional Analysis: Article I and the War Powers Resolution

The United States Constitution is unambiguous. **Article I, Section 8, Clause 11** vests in Congress — and Congress alone — the power to declare war. The President's authority under **Article II, Section 2** designates him Commander-in-Chief — a power of *direction*, not *initiation*, of military force.

The **last formal declaration of war** by Congress was in 1942.

The **War Powers Resolution of 1973** — enacted over Nixon's veto — was designed to restore congressional war-making authority after Vietnam. Its key provisions:

Section 2(c): Presidential use of force authorized only pursuant to (1) a declaration of war, (2) specific statutory authorization, or (3) a national emergency created by attack upon the United States, its territories, or its armed forces. Iran had not attacked the United States.

Section 3: The President "in every possible instance shall consult with Congress **before** introducing United States Armed Forces into hostilities." Briefing eight congressional leaders before the strikes is not consultation.

Section 4(a): The President shall submit a written report to Congress within **48 hours** of committing forces to hostilities.

Section 5(b): The President shall terminate use of forces within **60 calendar days** unless Congress has declared war, specifically authorized the action, or extended the period. The 60-day clock began February 28, 2026.

The Trump administration's legal argument: the strikes constituted "military actions, not an act of war," and Trump was acting within commander-in-chief authority. Secretary Rubio's justification: "We knew that there was going to be an Israeli action. We knew that that would precipitate an attack against American forces. And we knew that if we didn't preemptively go after them before they launched those attacks, we would suffer higher casualties."

This is a legal theory that would allow any president to wage war against any country whose ally is about to do something that might cause that country to retaliate against U.S. forces. It is, in the assessment of multiple constitutional scholars, unlimited executive war-making authority.

International Law: UN Charter, Geneva Conventions, and War Crimes

UN Charter Article 2(4) — the foundational prohibition on the use of force between states — prohibits military action except in two cases: self-defense under Article 51 (requiring an actual armed attack), or UN Security Council authorization.

Article 51 permits military force only *after* an armed attack occurs. Iran had not attacked the United States. Secretary Rubio's own words confirmed there had been no attack: the U.S. struck preemptively because it anticipated a chain reaction.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated at an emergency Security Council meeting on February 28 that the U.S.-Israeli airstrikes **violated international law**. The Arms Control Association stated: "The ongoing attacks cannot, as Trump claims, 'ensure' that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons. Iran still possesses a nuclear weapons capability — it has since 2007 according to the U.S. intelligence community — and it will at the end of this current conflict."

The Minab School Bombing

The most legally devastating single incident of the war to date occurred on its first day. According to independent investigations by the New York Times,

CBC, and NPR, the U.S. was likely responsible for striking the Shajareh Tayyebeh Girls' Elementary School in Minab, Hormozgan Province — three times, during the school day.

The facts, as documented by the New Lines Institute: - 165–186 people were killed, predominantly girls aged 7 to 12 - The school had been physically separated from a nearby IRGC naval compound since at least 2016 - Al Jazeera's Digital Investigations Unit confirmed the school "had been separated from the military complex and had become a clearly defined civilian institution for more than 10 years" - A newly opened medical clinic on the same block was bypassed — demonstrating precision targeting capability was available

The New Lines Institute's legal conclusion: "Either U.S. and Israeli forces relied on a very old, outdated intelligence target bank — which would constitute **grave negligence and reckless disregard for civilian lives** — or the strike was carried out **deliberately**."

Under the Geneva Conventions (Additional Protocol I, Article 52), schools are explicitly protected civilian objects. Three tests for war crimes are met: (1) distinction between civilians and combatants failed; (2) proportionality violated — killing 150+ children cannot be "proportionate" to any military advantage; (3) precaution absent — publicly available satellite imagery from 2016 clearly showed the school's civilian character.

UNESCO called it "a grave violation of humanitarian law." The UN Secretary-General condemned the strike. Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai condemned the strike. Two additional schools near Tehran were struck on March 5.

The Nuremberg Principles

The Nuremberg tribunal stated that waging a war of aggression constitutes "the supreme international crime." Nuremberg Principle VI(a) defines: "Planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances" as a crime against peace.

Nuremberg Principle III: "The fact that a person who committed an act which constitutes a crime under international law, acted as Head of State or responsible government official, **does not relieve him from responsibility under international law**."

ICC Jurisdiction

The U.S. is not a party to the Rome Statute. Iran is not a party. However, Article 12(3) allows any state to file a declaration with the ICC Registrar accepting jurisdiction over crimes committed on its territory. Palestine and Ukraine both used this mechanism. The human rights organization DAWN (Democracy for the Arab World Now) has called on Iran to file such a declaration to grant ICC jurisdiction over the Minab school strike.

The Trump administration further complicated accountability by issuing an Executive Order on February 6, 2025 imposing sanctions on ICC officials — declaring any ICC effort to investigate U.S. or allied personnel "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."

Elizabeth Warren's Statement and Its Implications

Warren's March 3–4 Senate floor statements deserve full quotation because they constitute the most direct official indictment of the war's legal foundation:

> "We are facing a dark moment in our country's history. On Saturday, Donald Trump decided to drag the American people into a reckless, illegal war with Iran. A war based on lies. A war launched with no imminent threat to our nation."
>
> "The Trump administration has no plan in Iran. This illegal war is based on lies, and it was launched without any imminent threat to our nation. Donald Trump still hasn't given a single clear reason for this war, and he seems to have no plan for how to end it."

Warren also called for investigation of the Minab school bombing and for accountability of every Trump official who "lied to the American people about this unconstitutional war." She noted the central contradiction: Trump announced in June 2025 that Iran's nuclear facilities had been "completely and totally obliterated" — yet was now claiming Iran's nuclear capabilities constituted an imminent threat. "Both of those things cannot be true."

The Nuclear Proliferation Paradox

The journalist and commentator Mehdi Hasan had been making this argument for years before February 28, 2026. After the Iran strikes, it went viral:

> "Ukraine gave up nukes and got invaded. Saddam Hussein gave up [WMD programs] and got invaded. Gaddafi gave up his nuclear program and got invaded and killed. North Korea kept its nukes — and hasn't been invaded. What lesson does Iran learn from this?"

Country	Nuclear Status	U.S./Coalition Action
Iraq	Gave up WMD programs; no nuclear weapons	Invaded 2003
Libya	Surrendered nuclear program 2003	Regime change/ killed 2011
Ukraine	Gave up Soviet nuclear arsenal (Budapest Memorandum, 1994)	Invaded by Russia 2022
North Korea	Maintained and expanded nuclear arsenal	NOT invaded
Iran	No nuclear weapons; was negotiating	Attacked 2025, 2026

In September 2025, more than **70 members of Iran's parliament** called for development of nuclear weapons, arguing it is "the only means to preserve Iran's territorial integrity and avoid the fate of Iraq and Libya." The ISIS Institute for Science and International Security confirmed this calculus.

The central paradox: by attacking Iran *because* it was near-nuclear, the United States has demonstrated to every other country that (1) diplomatic concessions do not provide security, (2) conventional military weakness invites attack, and (3) the only reliable deterrent against U.S. military action is a nuclear arsenal. This creates powerful incentives for nuclear proliferation — precisely the opposite of the stated U.S. goal.

PART VII: THE MACHINERY OF CONSENT

The Surveillance State: From Snowden to AI Prompts

On June 5, 2013, Edward Snowden's disclosures revealed the architecture of the American surveillance state: PRISM, a warrantless wiretapping program vacuuming up emails, messages, chats, and calls from at least nine major internet companies — not targeted, but systematic bulk collection, pooled into NSA, FBI, and CIA databases searchable for years afterward.

In 2020 — seven years after the original exposure — a federal appeals court ruled the NSA's telephone dragnet **was illegal**, and that intelligence leaders who publicly defended it "were not truthful." Snowden: "I never imagined that I would live to see our courts condemn the NSA's activities as unlawful and in the same ruling credit me for exposing them."

The architecture was built in layers: the PATRIOT Act (2001), enacted 45 days after 9/11 by margins of 357–66 and 98–1; FISA Section 702 (2008); Executive Order 12333. Between 2020 and early 2022, the FBI conducted more than **278,000 searches** of surveillance databases that did not meet legal standards. FBI queries on U.S. persons reached **2,964,643 in 2021**.

The Galloway/Whittaker Warning About AI Surveillance

A new surveillance frontier emerged in early 2026. Scott Galloway, professor and investor, published a conversation with **Meredith Whittaker**, president of Signal Messenger, under the headline: *"Why your prompts could be subpoenaed."*

Whittaker's warning:

> "If you're using ChatGPT, that data is being sent to servers controlled by OpenAI and Microsoft. They retain that data. They could leak that data. We know that when presented with a valid subpoena, they will turn that data over. In a world in which norms and laws and definitions of criminality shift from one year to the next, it's good to be cognizant of where that data could go and what it could do in terms of marking you as one or another type of person."

The data from AI prompts represents a category of intimate disclosure that users generate unconsciously — questions about health, relationships, finances, legal worries, political beliefs, sexual orientation. Unlike search queries, AI prompts are conversational, contextual, and often confessional. The infrastructure capturing this data (OpenAI servers running on Microsoft Azure) is identical to the infrastructure already subject to NSA PRISM collection and standard federal subpoena authority.

The implication for anti-war activists in 2026: anyone asking an AI assistant about the legality of the Iran war, about draft evasion, about how to organize a protest, about classified documents — is generating a record that is potentially subject to government subpoena.

Media Failure: The Iraq Precedent and the 2026 Repetition

The canonical case of media failure enabling a war of lies is Judith Miller's reporting for the New York Times in 2002–2003. Miller wrote or co-wrote 10 of the 28 stories cited in the Times' own May 2004 internal mea culpa on Iraq coverage. The template: anonymous Bush administration officials provided WMD claims; Miller published them on the front page; officials cited the Times stories on television the same morning — a feedback loop between official propaganda and "independent" journalism.

The Times' own editors acknowledged: "In some cases, information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged."

In 2026, CNN's staff revolted against commentator Scott Jennings, a Republican operative, who posted to nearly 1 million followers that "senior Trump administration officials" told him Iran had "credible intelligence" of planned strikes against U.S. targets — directly contradicting CNN's own reporting the same day, which stated that Trump's claim about Iran building long-range missiles "had never been backed up by U.S. intelligence." CNN chief Mark Thompson defended Jennings, saying the network does not "police contributors to the same extent" as journalists.

The contrast with Vietnam-era journalism is stark. Walter Cronkite went to Vietnam himself. After the Tet Offensive, he broadcast: "To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists

who have been wrong in the past... It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could." President Johnson reportedly said: "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost Middle America."

Seymour Hersh drove hundreds of miles to find Lieutenant Calley after getting a tip about My Lai, sat with him through the night as he talked, interviewed 50 witnesses over three months, and broke the story through a small antiwar news service after major magazines rejected it. Today, the question is whether any mainstream journalist will do the equivalent — go find the intelligence analyst who knows the Iran war justification is fabricated and print their account.

The Epstein Files and Elite Impunity

The partial release of Epstein files — through the Epstein Files Transparency Act, signed by Trump after passing 427–1 in the House — has confirmed the existence of elite networks operating with near-total impunity.

The documents revealed: meetings between Epstein and Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Steve Bannon; 18,000 personal emails; a 2011 exchange in which Epstein referred to Trump as "the dog that hasn't barked"; photos implicating presidents, tech billionaires, and intelligence operatives; and Epstein's role as point of contact for visa applicants from Eastern Europe and China.

The central unanswered question remains: why were the files suppressed? Former U.S. Attorney Alexander Acosta reportedly told Trump transition officials in 2016 that he had "been told" Epstein "belonged to intelligence" and to "leave it alone." Representative Thomas Massie stated publicly that Epstein "almost certainly had close ties to U.S. intelligence agencies and Israel's intelligence agencies."

DOJ surveillance of reviewing lawmakers: Rep. Jamie Raskin accused the Justice Department of spying on members of Congress who were reviewing Epstein files — with images emerging of AG Bondi holding a binder open to a page labeled "Jayapal Pramila Search History."

Representative Ro Khanna, who helped force the release:

> "We must question how we have cultivated an elite that is so immature, reckless, and arrogant."

The Epstein files matter in the Iran war context because they document the same phenomenon that Ellsberg described: a network of powerful people operating above the law, making decisions with life-and-death consequences, with no accountability mechanism. The same immunity that protected Epstein's network for decades protects the architects of illegal wars.

The Evangelical End-Times Caucus

Just days before Operation Epic Fury launched, former Representative Michele Bachmann appeared on the "Hearts of Oak" program:

> "They're blatant about it because they're so filled with demonic rage. They're filled with satanic rage, these ayatollahs. You could only hate someone if Satan was living inside of you. It's the only way it could be. And so that's why they need to be defeated. They need to go. This literally goes back to the Garden of Eden with Satan and Satan's hatred for God."

After the strikes began, Bachmann declared:

> "I truly believe that **God ordained these two men** — Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu — to be the leaders of those nations at this exact time for this exact purpose."

This is not a fringe position. It reflects **Dispensationalist theology** — a 19th-century system developed by John Nelson Darby that identifies Iran (ancient "Persia") in Ezekiel 38–39 as a key enemy in the end-times war. In this framework, war against Iran is prophetically scheduled, and peace with Israel's enemies is "resisting God's plan."

White House Deputy Chief of Staff Dan Scavino posted video footage of pastors laying hands on President Trump in a prayer circle in the Oval Office. The ceremony was interpreted globally as administration efforts to rationalize military action in spiritual terms.

The institutional apparatus:

- **John Hagee and CUFI (Christians United for Israel)**: tens of millions of members; Hagee delivered the benediction at the U.S.

Embassy opening in Jerusalem; after Iran's April 2024 attack, declared "we don't need to de-escalate"

- **Pete Hegseth, Secretary of Defense**: stated in 2018 that rebuilding the Temple on the Temple Mount is possible; toured the site with the Temple Institute's Rabbi Chaim Richman
- **Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House**: invited to Israel by Third Temple supporters; first act as Speaker was a resolution of unconditional support for Israel

Oxford Academic's *Diplomatic History* journal: "The influence of Christian Zionism is a very serious issue for the practice of American diplomacy in the Middle East." Christian Zionist leaders lobby against negotiation and compromise; their theology makes diplomatic solutions to the conflict not merely inadvisable but *anti-God*.

The Milgram Experiment: Why People Obey

In 1961–1962, Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted experiments designed to understand how the Holocaust had been possible — how ordinary people became agents of mass murder.

The setup: Participants were told to administer increasingly intense electric shocks — from 15 volts to 450 volts — to an "learner" who gave wrong answers. The learner was an actor; the shocks were fake. But the participant did not know that.

The results: - **65% of participants** administered the maximum 450-volt shock - **Every single participant** went to at least 300 volts - Participants showed extreme visible distress — sweating, trembling, stuttering — yet continued - When the experimenter was physically absent and gave instructions by phone, compliance dropped to **21%** - When participants witnessed others refusing, compliance dropped to **10%**

Milgram: "The most fundamental lesson of our study is that ordinary people, simply doing their jobs and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process."

In our conversations, Ellsberg expanded on Milgram's findings with insight that I don't believe anyone else has articulated as precisely:

"What I draw from the various levels and types of experiments — contract, conformity, obedience — is that people are not as inhibited against inflicting pain as we like to think. Humans don't mind doing this very much. They mind a little. They'd prefer to do something else. But it's not as hard to get people to hurt other people as you would think. What you mean by thinking is, one likes to think there has to be a very strong reason to do that."

Ellsberg connected this directly to the group dynamics that sustain wars:

> "People will do almost anything to stay in a group that they wanna be in. No matter how criminal, disastrous, reckless, foolish, deceptive. People's willingness to go along — in other words, not going along and being expelled from a group that you value and respect is, this is my proposition, almost unattainable. It's not an alternative for people. They're almost unable to do it. They can't do it. They won't do it."

My Lai, March 16, 1968: approximately 100 U.S. soldiers entered a Vietnamese village and murdered between 347 and 504 unarmed civilians — women, children, elderly men. Ellsberg's assessment:

"I would've said, even from my infantry experience, they would not have done it without an order. They don't do this type of thing without an order from a superior. But an order from Calley, who was an obvious nerd, an obvious nothing, you know, nebbish. Everybody recognized this guy is a kind of a fool. But it was an order. He got the order from his captain, who was not a fool. Captain Medina got his orders from Colonel Henderson. Henderson from the division. It went all the way up: 'Destroy that village.'"

Lieutenant Calley testified: "There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai. If you are asking why I did not stand up to them when I was given the orders, I will have to say that I was a 2nd lieutenant getting orders from my commander and I followed them — foolishly, I guess."

Abu Ghraib, 2004: Seymour Hersh's reporting revealed American soldiers mistreating prisoners while following directives from intelligence officers. The soldiers' defense — that they were following orders and protocols — echoed Milgram's participants almost exactly, forty years later.

The implication for 2026: The American soldiers executing Operation Epic Fury are not monsters. The drone operators striking Iranian cities are

not fundamentally different from the rest of us. They are inside the agentic state that Milgram described. They have been told this is legal, necessary, and right. They are following orders from an authority they have been trained to trust. The Milgram experiment predicts, with precision, what they will do.

Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Empire

The Milgram experiment tells us *that* ordinary people enable atrocity. Hannah Arendt tells us *why* — and what that enabling looks like from the inside, at the level of institutions, bureaucracies, and the manufacture of moral permission.

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was a German-Jewish political philosopher who fled Nazi Germany, was interned in a French detention camp, and arrived in the United States in 1941 as a stateless refugee. Her biography gave her an unusual vantage point: she had lived inside the machinery of totalitarianism, experienced what it meant to have your citizenship revoked by decree, and spent the rest of her life trying to understand how ordinary modern societies slide into systematic atrocity. Her two masterworks — *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) — remain among the most important political texts of the twentieth century, and their relevance to the present moment — surveillance states, manufactured consent for war, normalized empire — grows with each passing year.

The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951)

In her 500-page debut, Arendt traced the emergence of totalitarianism not to some uniquely German or Russian pathology but to structural forces within modernity itself: the rise of antisemitism as a political tool, the logic of European imperialism (which normalized racial hierarchy and unlimited expansion), and the social atomization of mass industrial society. Arendt argued that totalitarian movements do not simply seize power through force — they manufacture consent through a unique epistemological environment in which propaganda destroys the very capacity to distinguish fact from fiction. (Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism, Not Even Past, 2015)

Her analysis of propaganda is especially chilling in the current moment. In a related 1967 essay, *Truth and Politics*, she wrote: "The result of a consistent

and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth and truth be defamed as a lie, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world — and the category of truth versus falsehood is among the mental means to this end — is being destroyed." (Philosophy Break: Hannah Arendt 5 Insights into Totalitarianism) She also wrote, in *Origins*: "The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness."

Arendt identified loneliness and social atomization as the psychological preconditions for totalitarianism. "Totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within." Her central argument was that totalitarian systems "rely on mass movements fueled by loneliness, social atomization, and an eagerness to embrace simplistic narratives that explain complex realities." (Texas Public Radio, September 9, 2025)

Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil (1963)

In 1961, Arendt persuaded *The New Yorker* to send her to Jerusalem to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann — the SS Lieutenant Colonel who had organized the deportation of millions of Jews to Nazi death camps. She expected to encounter a monster. What she found, and what disturbed her more deeply than any monster would have, was a bureaucrat: a vain, shallow, cliché-spouting middle manager who had organized mass murder not out of sadistic pleasure or ideological conviction, but out of careerism, obedience, and an almost total inability to think from the perspective of another person.

"The longer one listened to him," Arendt wrote, "the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of someone else." (Philosophy Now: Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil) Eichmann's evil was "banal" not in the sense that it was trivial — the consequences were catastrophic — but in the sense that it arose from the most ordinary human failing:

thoughtlessness. Eichmann "did not think" — by which Arendt did not mean he was stupid, but that he refused to exercise the moral imagination required to understand what he was actually doing to other human beings. He had substituted bureaucratic obedience for conscience, and the Nazi system had made this substitution not just possible but obligatory and rewarded.

Arendt's central insight was that "from the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied... that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong." (WIST Quotations: Hannah Arendt) She concluded: "It was sheer thoughtlessness — something by no means identical with stupidity — that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period."

The Bureaucratic Dehumanization of Evil

Arendt argued that modernity — specifically bureaucratic, industrialized culture — supplied the conditions necessary to make Eichmann possible. "The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them." (WIST Quotations: Hannah Arendt) When individuals cease to act as moral agents and instead identify themselves entirely with a role, a system, or a movement, they become capable of participating in atrocities while maintaining a clean conscience — not because they are evil, but because they have stopped thinking.

This framework explains not only the Holocaust but the mechanics of imperial warfare, drone operators who kill wedding parties from air-conditioned rooms in Nevada, defense contractors who profit from munitions used on Yemeni children, policy analysts who develop starvation sanctions that kill civilians, and media figures who normalize each new escalation as reasonable and necessary. The banality is not in the small scale of the evil — it is in the ordinary, unremarkable character of those who enable it. As Arendt wrote: "The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil." (Reddit: Hannah Arendt on the Banality of Evil)

Arendt's Framework Applied to the Present

Arendt's analysis applies with uncomfortable precision to the current American-Israeli military campaign against Iran — begun February 28, 2026. The manufacture of threat narratives to justify preemptive war (weapons of mass destruction, imminent danger) mirrors exactly the "consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth" she identified as the hallmark of totalitarian propaganda. The bureaucrats who approve each airstrike, the military officials who brief Congress with classified information that can never be publicly contested, the media figures who repeat administration talking points about "defending American lives" — all participate in what Arendt would recognize as the banality: ordinary people, doing their jobs, enabling atrocity through thoughtlessness and careerism.

The normalization of empire — the assumption that the United States has the right to bomb any country that it designates as a threat, without congressional authorization, without UN sanction, without evidence of imminent attack — is the manufactured consent Arendt warned about. The sense by which we take our bearings — the category of justified versus unjustified war — is being destroyed, not by any single lie but by the cumulative weight of decades of unchallenged imperial practice. Each new war comes wrapped in the language of liberation and defense. Each new bombing campaign is presented as defensive. Each murdered wedding party is a "tragic mistake." Each downed civilian airliner is a "regrettable accident." The machinery grinds on. The functionaries follow orders. And the evil remains, as Arendt said, terrifyingly banal.

PART VIII: THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK AND THE NUCLEAR DIMENSION

85 Seconds to Midnight

On January 27, 2026, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved the Doomsday Clock to **85 seconds to midnight** — the closest to catastrophe in the clock's 79-year history.

Professor Daniel Holz, chair of the Science and Security Board: "For the first time in over half a century, there will be nothing preventing a runaway nuclear arms race." The New START Treaty — the last remaining arms control agreement between the U.S. and Russia — expired in February 2026 without renewal.

The numbers: - **9 nuclear-armed states** - **~12,300 nuclear warheads** globally - **~2,000 warheads** on hair-trigger alert (ready to launch within minutes) - U.S.: ~5,500 warheads total, ~1,700 deployed - Russia: ~6,200 warheads total, ~1,600 deployed - Combined U.S. and Russian deployed arsenal: sufficient to end human civilization multiple times

Ellsberg's warning in our 2015 conversations, delivered with characteristic precision:

"What probability of all-out nuclear war, which could happen any minute as we speak? We're poised for it. Weapons are there. They're on hair-trigger alert. A false alarm could set it off at any time. It's not a matter of capabilities that don't yet exist. They exist, and they're unstable right now. A nuclear weapon going off or real fighting between with Russia breaking out in a big way will bring the subject up."

And the existential assessment:

"I regard it as an urgent problem now, although it is not generally so regarded. It's not on our agenda. The likelihood of an all-out war has not grown. If anything, it's probably diminished somewhat, but not anywhere near zero. What probability of that is tolerable? Almost anything higher than zero is intolerable when we're talking about all-out nuclear war."

Ellsberg was blunt about the stakes:

"While the U.S. retains its current imperial mindset, either the imperial mindset changes, as it has changed in various countries, or we go down. It's an intolerable risk to live with... This is fucking life. Not that it's acceptable. It's horrible. It's why the human species is drifting toward extinction."

Iran's Nuclear Program and the JCPOA Collapse

The history of Iran's nuclear program cannot be understood outside the history of U.S. policy toward it.

The JCPOA (July 2015): The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action committed Iran to limiting enrichment to 3.67%, reducing its centrifuge count from ~19,000 to 5,060 operational, shipping out 25,000 pounds of enriched uranium, and allowing unprecedented IAEA inspections. Iran's "breakout time" — time to produce enough material for one bomb — was extended from 2–3 months to **12+ months**. The IAEA confirmed Iran's compliance repeatedly.

May 8, 2018: Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA, reimposing sanctions. The leaders of France, Germany, and the UK urged the U.S. to stay. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's analysis: "The US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA was a political measure aimed against Iran" — not an evidence-based technical objection.

Iran's predictable response (starting May 2019): - July 2019: enrichment above 3.67% - January 2020: no limits on centrifuge numbers - April 2021: began enriching to 60% (weapons-grade is 90%) - February 2021: removed IAEA monitoring devices

By February 2025, Iran had enriched **182 kg** of uranium to 60% purity — enough material for 5–6 nuclear weapons' worth, with further enrichment, achievable in less than two weeks.

June 2025 — Operation Midnight Hammer: The U.S. and Israel struck Iran's nuclear facilities at Natanz and Fordow. The Pentagon assessed the program had been "delayed by one to two years."

February 26, 2026 — two days before Epic Fury: Iran proposed a "years-long pause on enrichment" with "broad verification measures." The U.S. struck two days later.

Warren's assessment: "If Donald Trump believes that Iran's nuclear ambitions are a threat, he had the chance to curb them. In fact, the United States had a deal that would have prevented Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. That was President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran. And Trump ripped up that deal and got nothing in return."

The Arms Control Association concluded: "The ongoing attacks cannot, as Trump claims, 'ensure' that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons. Iran still possesses a nuclear weapons capability — it has since 2007 according to the U.S. intelligence community — and it will at the end of this current conflict."

The Proliferation Incentive

The Hasan/Ellsberg logic applied to nuclear weapons: the 2026 Iran war has not solved the nuclear problem. It has amplified every incentive for nuclear proliferation among states that feel threatened by U.S. military power.

Every nation with regional security concerns — in East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe — is now processing the same lesson: Iran negotiated, complied with a nuclear agreement, and was bombed anyway. Iraq and Libya gave up WMDs and were destroyed. North Korea did not give up its nuclear program and has not been invaded.

The rational conclusion from these data points, for any state seeking to deter U.S. military action, is unambiguous.

PART IX: WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Anti-War Movement's Hidden Success: The 1969 Moratorium

The most important thing Ellsberg told me — the one most crucial for anyone contemplating anti-war activism in 2026 — was also the least known: the anti-war movement of the 1960s worked. Not in the way it thought. Not by ending the war. But by preventing something far worse.

In 1969, Nixon planned to escalate the Vietnam War to a decisive conclusion by November 3 of that year. The plan included nuclear threats to North Vietnam, massive conventional escalation, possible invasion of North Vietnam, and the mining and flooding of the Red River dikes — which would have potentially caused one to two million deaths from famine. The Joint Chiefs supported the plan. Nixon believed it would force a settlement.

What stopped it:

"Because there were two million people in the streets on October 15th, 1969, all over the country, simultaneously, different time zones, simultaneously taking off from work and school and protesting the war — what was called the Moratorium, which was a euphemism for general strike since it was a work day. And the prospect of that continuing and expanding — two days in

November, three days in December — made Nixon understand that carrying out his ultimatum was impossible."

This is Ellsberg's central empirical finding about the anti-war movement, which he says is "almost never made":

"Without knowing that there was the imminent prospect of an escalation war, including the possibility of nuclear war — the anti-war people in general, and even the anti-war movement, don't know what it was they succeeded in achieving. As far as you could see from the anti-war movement, it had almost no perceptible effect. The war went on. It escalated. People didn't understand that the Joint Chiefs were pressing throughout this period for a bigger war, and Nixon was threatening a bigger war and planning a bigger war. They didn't know that. So they don't understand where the anti-war movement did have its real success."

Sam Brown, one of the four organizers of the Moratorium — and himself, initially, among those who thought the movement had failed — told Ellsberg decades later that he had publicly stated the movement had had no effect. Ellsberg told him: "You're wrong."

The mechanism was not congressional: Nixon didn't care about polls. The mechanism was *political feasibility*: Nixon understood that an escalation order, with millions of Americans already in the streets, would produce a breakdown of social order he could not survive. The movement didn't need to persuade Nixon. It needed to make the nuclear escalation option politically impossible.

This is the template for 2026.

Civil Disobedience and Mass Resistance as Historically Effective

Ellsberg's final words in our conversation — understanding that no one person acts alone:

> "The whole point of civil disobedience or mass resistance, civil nonviolent resistance, is that dictators depend on a lot of cooperation, and it is possible, at risk, to withdraw that cooperation and remove their power and change events."

He was precise about the 1969 lesson's applicability: "Without the moratorium, the nuclear threat almost surely would have been executed. The war would have been much larger. The anti-war movement definitely was critical under Nixon."

What is needed is not optimism. What is needed is the Moratorium model: mass, visible, sustained withdrawal of consent — sufficiently large that the political cost of continuing the war exceeds the political cost of stopping it.

Specific Actions

Call your representatives. Not email. Call. Congressional offices count phone calls.

- Senate Foreign Relations Committee: (202) 224-4651
- U.S. Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121
- Find your senators
- Find your representatives

The specific demands: 1. Vote against the $50 billion supplemental military request 2. Support a refiled War Powers resolution (Senator Kaine announced he would refile) 3. Demand classified briefings and hold public hearings on the stated vs. actual legal justification 4. Demand investigation of the Minab school bombing

Track the war's cost in real time at iran-cost-ticker.com.

Media accountability: The Iraq WMD media failure is repeating. Contact every major news organization demanding adversarial coverage of administration war justifications. Progressive media platforms with large audiences should deploy camera crews to Congress to demand yes-or-no answers on the war.

Organize locally: The 1969 Moratorium worked because it wasn't just in New York and San Francisco — it was "ten thousand here, fifteen thousand there, twenty-five in various little towns here and there that had never demonstrated before." Local organizing that produces constituent pressure is the mechanism that changes votes.

Electoral accountability: Midterm elections are November 2026. Every Senate vote on the War Powers resolution, every House vote on the supplemental, is a voting record. Make the war the issue.

The Case for Whistleblowing in 2026

Somewhere inside the U.S. government right now, there are analysts, officials, and military officers who know:

- That the intelligence justification for the Iran strikes was fabricated or grossly exaggerated
- That Pentagon officials told congressional staff Iran had "no plans to launch an unprovoked attack on U.S. forces or bases in the Middle East"
- That Secretary Rubio's public justification constitutes, in the assessment of multiple international law scholars, a war of aggression with no legal foundation

These people are at Step 1 or Step 2 of Ellsberg's three-step framework. They know. They know that they know. They are watching others not act.

The obstacles to Step 3 are real and should not be minimized. Ellsberg's final advice to potential whistleblowers, given in a 2023 Politico interview while dying of pancreatic cancer:

> "Don't do it under any delusion that you'll have a high chance of ending up like Daniel Ellsberg. My biggest advice is: don't do this unless you're ready to accept the high risk of having your career destroyed and actually going to prison. Don't go through channels. Don't go to the inspector general. That only serves to identify you as a troublemaker. And if you possibly can avoid exposing yourself, do that."

The surveillance environment of 2026 makes Step 3 categorically more dangerous than 1971. In Ellsberg's day, the government had to physically break into his psychiatrist's office to find material to destroy him with. Today, the government has years of AI prompt data, metadata, and the Espionage Act — deployed eight times under Obama, more than any previous president — calibrated as a weapon against leakers.

And yet the Ellsberg example stands. He was wrong that no one would act. Manning acted. Snowden acted. A federal appeals court vindicated Snowden in 2020. The question is not whether it is safe. It is not. The question is Ellsberg's Step 3 question:

> "Somebody ought to do this. Nobody else is doing it. Is it up to me?"

"Somebody Ought to Do This" — Ellsberg's Final Message

The last exchange in Chapter 12 of *Lied to Death*, in what was among the final conversations before Ellsberg's death, captures the essence of his life's work:

"I know this is exactly what Manning and Snowden both said," Ellsberg told me. "Namely: 'Somebody ought to reveal this. Somebody ought to blow the whistle. Somebody ought to tell about this. I wish somebody, I hope somebody will do it.' Second: 'Apparently, nobody's willing to do that. I'm the one who has access to it.' Third: 'So I guess it's up to me. I'll do it.'"

He paused.

"To the person involved, the whistleblower, it just seems very natural. 'Well, nobody else will do it. I guess I have to do it.' That's the way you think about it."

Then: "I don't know why it isn't obvious to other people. It seems obvious to me. Nobody else is doing it. I better do it."

And his closing meditation on what one person can and cannot do:

"No person can construct an act of enormous evil by himself, like Hitler. Takes a lot of cooperation. And the whole point of civil disobedience or mass resistance is that dictators depend on a lot of cooperation, and it is possible, at risk, to withdraw that cooperation and remove their power and change events."

"I was one link in a chain of events and actions — a number of which were out of the ordinary actions by a number of people that made it possible for the war to be ended."

He did not end the Vietnam War alone. The Moratorium organizers did not end the Vietnam War alone. The whole point is that no one ever does. The

whole point is that each person who acts becomes one more link in a chain — and that chains of people, acting together, have changed the course of history before.

They can again.

APPENDIX: MEHDI HASAN'S KEY ARGUMENTS

From Mehdi Hasan's debate on *Piers Morgan Uncensored* (August/ September 2024), clips of which went viral following the February 28, 2026 strikes:

1. The Proliferation Paradox (Nuclear Deterrence Logic)

Hasan's core argument, which became the most-shared clip: nations that relinquished their nuclear deterrents or WMD programs were invaded or had their leaders killed. Nations that retained nuclear weapons were not invaded.

Ukraine gave up its Soviet nuclear arsenal under the Budapest Memorandum (1994) in exchange for security guarantees from Russia, the U.S., and the UK. Russia invaded in 2022. Saddam Hussein's Iraq gave up WMD programs under UN pressure. Iraq was invaded in 2003. Gaddafi surrendered Libya's nuclear program in 2003 in exchange for Western normalization. Gaddafi was overthrown and killed in 2011. North Korea maintained and developed its nuclear arsenal. North Korea has not been invaded. Iran had no nuclear weapons and was negotiating. Iran was attacked in 2025 and 2026.

"What lesson does Iran learn from this?"

The rational answer, from the perspective of any Iranian strategic planner, is unambiguous. The ISIS analysis confirms: "within this context, reconstituting its nuclear capability in a dash for a nuclear weapon is viewed as a means of enhancing strategic deterrence." Seventy members of Iran's parliament explicitly invoked "the fate of Iraq and Libya" in calling for nuclear weapons development.

2. The Sovereignty Argument

The assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran — a sovereign Iranian city — in July 2024 was, Hasan argued, a blatant violation of international law and Iranian sovereignty, regardless of Haniyeh's status. This argument extends directly to the 2026 strikes: the United States has no legal authority to kill another nation's head of state on that nation's territory without a declaration of war or UN authorization.

3. The Root Cause Analysis

"The root cause of the regional violence is Israel's illegal military occupation of Palestinian land," Hasan stated, citing both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and global legal consensus. Without addressing the underlying political conflict, military action against its consequences is indefinitely self-defeating. "There is no military solution."

4. Netanyahu's Personal Political Interest

Hasan argued that Netanyahu wanted the war to continue to avoid his own corruption trials and to stay in power — making Netanyahu's personal legal jeopardy a direct driver of Israeli (and therefore, through lobbying, U.S.) military policy. This is not a peripheral claim: Netanyahu was under active indictment for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust in Israeli courts.

5. Double Standards on Sovereignty

Hasan challenged his interlocutors to apply consistent principles: those who condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a violation of sovereignty and international law cannot simultaneously support military strikes on Iran without any UN authorization or legal basis. "You cannot have one rule for Russia and a different rule for the United States and Israel."

6. JCPOA Causation

Hasan cited Trump's 2018 JCPOA withdrawal as the direct cause of Iran's nuclear acceleration — a factual claim confirmed by the Arms Control Association timeline. Warren made the same argument in her Senate floor speech: "If Donald Trump believes that Iran's nuclear ambitions are a threat,

he had the chance to curb them. The United States had a deal that would have prevented Iran from getting a nuclear weapon."

EPILOGUE: THE UNITED STATES OF AMNESIA

Senator Hiram Johnson said in 1917: "The first casualty when war comes is truth." He said it watching the United States enter the First World War on the back of propaganda campaigns, yellow journalism, and manufactured German atrocity stories that would later be largely debunked. Johnson was right then. He was right about every war that followed.

We are, as the late Gore Vidal called us, the United States of Amnesia. Each war is sold as the first one, as a novel crisis, as an unavoidable necessity. The machinery that produced the Gulf of Tonkin fabrication, the WMD deception, the Libya "humanitarian intervention," and now Operation Epic Fury is not new. It is the same machinery, staffed by the same institutional interests, using the same playbook, because the playbook has worked every time.

It worked every time because of what Milgram showed us and what Ellsberg confirmed from inside the system: ordinary people, doing their jobs, inside institutions with legitimate authority, will participate in processes that lead to mass death. They will not blow the whistle. They will tell themselves the system has its reasons. They will trust that someone more senior has reviewed the intelligence. They will believe that dissent is futile. They will calculate, correctly, that the personal cost of acting is immediate and certain while the cost of silence is diffuse and shared with millions of others.

The political scientist Hannah Arendt called this "the banality of evil." It is not banality in the sense of unimportance. It is banality in the sense that it requires no monsters — only ordinary people doing ordinary things within an extraordinary institutional structure designed to produce mass death.

But Milgram also showed us the exit. When participants witnessed others refusing, compliance dropped from 65% to 10%. The mechanism of conscience is not individual moral heroism. It is witnessing that conscience is

possible — that someone else has decided "I will not do this" — which makes the decision available to you.

This is what the 1969 Moratorium did. Two million people in the streets made it visible that refusal was possible. That it had already happened. That you were not alone in seeing what you saw. Nixon's nuclear escalation plan died not because Congress voted against it — Congress didn't know about it — but because the President looked at two million people and understood that the social fabric required to execute mass destruction had not been secured.

Thirteen weeks from now — on May 28, 2026 — the 60-day War Powers clock expires. Without congressional authorization, U.S. forces must be withdrawn from hostilities with Iran under the plain text of the War Powers Resolution. Senator Kaine has pledged to refile S.J.Res.104. The 53-47 vote shows the margin is three senators. Three senators whose constituents could put 100,000 people in their home states in the streets between now and then.

History does not offer guarantees. The Moratorium did not end the Vietnam War. Vietnam continued for six more years, during which three World War IIs' worth of bombs were dropped. But the Moratorium prevented it from becoming four or five World War IIs, prevented it from becoming nuclear. In the history books, that does not appear as a victory. But in the graves that were not dug, in the children who grew up with fathers who came home, in the cities of North Vietnam that were not atomized — it was a victory of incalculable significance.

The Iran war is one week old as this document is written. The 60-day clock runs until late April. The nuclear clock stands at 85 seconds to midnight. The Strait of Hormuz is partially reopened but remains contested. Six Americans are dead. One hundred sixty-five Iranian schoolgirls are dead. The war is young.

Ellsberg ended our final conversation by saying something I have carried with me:

> "No person can construct an act of enormous evil by himself, like Hitler. Takes a lot of cooperation. And the whole point of civil disobedience or mass resistance, civil nonviolent resistance, is that dictators depend on a

> lot of cooperation, and it is possible, at risk, to withdraw that cooperation and remove their power and change events."

Then, after a pause:

> "I was one link in a chain of events and actions — a number of which were out of the ordinary actions by a number of people that made it possible for the war to be ended."

He did not claim to have ended the Vietnam War. He was a link. You are a link. The question — the only question that matters now — is whether you are the kind of link that holds, or the kind that breaks.

Somebody ought to do this. Nobody else is doing it. I guess it's up to me.

SUPPLEMENT: Days 10–14 — What Changed After the Primer Was Written

This section covers major developments from March 7–10, 2026 — the period after the original primer was completed. Rather than revising the analysis already presented, this supplement documents new evidence that has strengthened, extended, or complicated the primer's core arguments. It is current as of March 10, 2026.

The Smoking Gun: Rubio Admits Israel Drove the War

On March 3, 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio gave an interview that became the single most consequential admission of this war:

> "We understood that if Iran were to be attacked, which we believed was going to happen [by Israel], they would swiftly retaliate against us, and we were not prepared to endure a strike before taking action."

This was reported by the Daily Mail and immediately drew bipartisan shock. Matt Walsh, a conservative commentator, said: "He is blatantly indicating

that we are at war with Iran because Israel forced our hand. This is quite possibly the worst thing he could have said."

Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX) was more direct: "Secretary Rubio's comments suggest that Israel endangered U.S. troops by insisting on an attack on Iran. The administration was complicit — joining their conflict instead of de-escalating it."

On March 9, President Trump told the Times of Israel that the decision to end the war would be made "mutually" with Prime Minister Netanyahu. His exact words: "We've worked together. We've destroyed a country that wanted to destroy Israel."

Not America. Israel.

This confirmation validates the argument made throughout Parts I and III of this primer: the stated reasons for war are never the real reasons. The covert foreign policy Ellsberg described — "we're doing something, with different purposes, different allies, different from what we claim" — is now the stated policy, blurted out on the record by the Secretary of State.

AIPAC's $100 Million and the Death of War Powers

The constitutional mechanism designed to prevent exactly this situation — the War Powers Resolution — failed in both chambers. The Senate voted 47-53. The House voted 212-219. Seven votes in the House decided whether congressional authorization would be enforced.

AIPAC's political action committee, United Democracy Project, has $100 million allocated for 2026 races. It is active in dozens of congressional elections. Three House Democrats who received a combined $1.7 million from AIPAC-affiliated donors were among the votes that killed the resolution. The Lever documented the money trail in detail.

John Mearsheimer, writing in his March 7 essay "Bombing to Lose," stated plainly: "Trump was dragged into this war by Israel and its enormously powerful lobby. Both Rubio and House Speaker Mike Johnson admitted this."

Jeffrey Sachs: "This has been an Israeli dream for 30 years. Israel has caused war across the Middle East using the US and using its effective ownership of Washington."

Ben Rhodes — Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor for eight years and the architect of the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal — spent the week of March 7–10 publicly amplifying Senator Chris Van Hollen holding Trump and Defense Secretary Hegseth personally responsible for the school strike, sharing AIPAC's endorsement of Trump's "Death, Fire, and Fury" threat against Iran, and warning about the refugee crisis.

The Updated Human Cost

As of Day 11 (March 10, 2026), the human toll has become staggering:

Category	Number	Source
Dead in Iran	1,255+ (200 children)	Iranian officials
Dead in Lebanon	486+ (83 children)	Lebanese Health Ministry
Dead in US forces	7	Pentagon
Dead in Israel	15	Israeli officials
Injured in Iran	12,000+	Iranian Red Crescent
Displaced in Lebanon	700,000 (200,000 children)	UNICEF/UN News
Displaced across region	25 million (refugees, IDPs, returnees)	UNHCR Flash Update
Fled Tehran (first 48 hours)	100,000+	UNHCR/Reuters
Afghans at risk in Iran	3.8 million	Forbes
Civilian sites hit in Iran	6,668 (5,535 homes, 65 schools, 14+ hospitals)	Iranian Red Crescent

Category	Number	Source
WFP food ration warning	May cut to 25% for 1.3 million people	UN News

The single most viral piece of independent journalism of this war came from Drop Site News on March 8: Bellingcat geolocated footage confirmed that US Tomahawk cruise missiles — not Israeli munitions — hit the girls' school in Minab that killed 168–180 children. Researcher Trevor Ball: "Israel does not possess Tomahawk missiles. The United States does." The post reached 7.5 million impressions and 50,294 likes.

On March 9, the State Department declared the Iran war an "emergency" to fast-track the sale of 20,000+ bombs to Israel, bypassing normal congressional review.

Mojtaba Khamenei: The Succession That Wasn't Supposed to Happen

On March 8–9, Iran's 88-member Assembly of Experts appointed Mojtaba Khamenei — son of the assassinated Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei — as the new Supreme Leader. He is 56 years old, has never held public office, never given a public speech or press interview, and has limited photographs in existence.

The IDF had reportedly threatened to target any Assembly member who appointed a successor. The members voted remotely.

Reports indicate Mojtaba was injured in the same February 28 strike that killed his father. Trump called him "unacceptable" and said "he won't last long."

All Iranian institutions immediately issued loyalty statements. The defense council declared: "We will follow the commander-in-chief until our last drop of blood."

This is precisely the rallying effect that this primer warned about in Part IV. A wounded son succeeding his assassinated father is a martyrdom narrative Iran's theocracy was designed to exploit. The regime did not fragment. It consolidated.

Iran Rejects Ceasefire — and Shifts Tactics

Foreign Minister Araghchi told NBC: Iran rejects ceasefire calls, will not negotiate, and considers this an "existential war."

A secret Iranian overture to the CIA (through a third-country intelligence service) was described by US officials as "not serious." Netanyahu checked whether Trump was negotiating behind Israel's back. The White House reassured him: no talks.

More significantly, Jeremy Scahill reported in Drop Site News on March 9 that a senior Iranian official revealed Iran is considering scaling back attacks on US bases in Arab states while intensifying strikes on Israel directly. Iran believes its attacks have already achieved the goal of "degrading major radar systems and depleting stockpiles of interceptors." The strategy is shifting to "maximum pressure on US and Israeli interests to compel them to halt the war."

For Iran to "win" this war, as Mearsheimer argued, it simply has to survive. There is currently no off-ramp. Trump is declaring victory while Iran is declaring existential war. These two positions are irreconcilable.

The Palantir Double Conflict: Inspector to Executioner

A Byline Times investigation published March 5 documented what may be the most consequential conflict of interest of this war. Palantir's MOSAIC platform — a $50 million AI system processing 400 million data objects — monitored Iran's nuclear program for the International Atomic Energy Agency. When MOSAIC flagged a uranium surge in June 2025, that assessment reportedly drove Israel's strike decision.

Now Palantir's Maven Smart System — built on Anthropic's Claude AI — is selecting the bomb targets. It hit 1,000 targets in the first 24 hours. And Palantir stock surged 7% in the first week, pushing its valuation past $300 billion.

The company that told us there was a threat is profiting from the war launched to address it.

Peter Thiel, Palantir's co-founder, has argued that every case of adversary nuclear acquisition produces war. Joe Lonsdale, another co-founder, called

for preemptive strikes and wants to "invest in Iran" post-regime change. Alex Karp, the CEO, predicted in August 2024 that the US would face a three-front war in which autonomous weapons would be decisive.

Palantir signed a strategic partnership with Israel's Defense Ministry in January 2024.

Daniel Ellsberg spent his life warning about exactly this convergence of intelligence assessment, weapons targeting, and profit motive under one corporate roof. He called it the Doomsday Machine. This is what it looks like in the AI age.

The Ellison Octopus: Media Consolidation During War

Larry Ellison — co-founder of Oracle, third-richest person alive — now controls or has major stakes in CBS, Paramount, HBO, CNN, approximately 15% of TikTok, and Oracle's classified AI infrastructure running at Top Secret clearance.

On the same day the US launched strikes on Iran, Oracle published a blog post announcing government authorization to run AI on federal data at Top Secret levels. His son David Ellison's Skydance completed the Paramount-WBD merger, consolidating CBS, HBO, CNN, and Nickelodeon under one roof. Bari Weiss — described by critics as a "pro-Zionist activist" — was placed in charge of CBS.

The man profiting from the war infrastructure also controls the media covering it. Free Press warned: "Trump and his allies are working to consolidate the media into the hands of right-wing oligarchs. This is especially dangerous in a time of war."

This is Part VII of this primer — the Machinery of Consent — made concrete and current. Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers because he understood that information control enables war. Now one man controls the news networks, the social platforms, and the classified AI systems simultaneously.

Russia Provides Intelligence to Iran

Four sources told NBC News on March 8 that Russia is providing intelligence to Iran regarding US force positions, including information to locate US warships. Araghchi acknowledged that "collaboration between Iran and

Russia is not something new." Russia's bilateral partnership with Iran (2025) notably lacks a mutual defense clause — but intelligence sharing is the next-best thing.

The Pakistan Humanitarian Crisis

Pakistan, already stressed by regional instability, experienced its largest fuel price hike in history (20%+) as a direct consequence of the Hormuz closure. Schools were closed for two weeks. At the US Consulate in Karachi, between 24 and 26 protesters were killed.

The ICC Complaint

The Iranian Red Crescent filed a formal complaint with the International Criminal Court. DAWN (Democracy for the Arab World Now) urged Iran to grant the ICC jurisdiction under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute.

Trump's "Mission Accomplished" Moment

On March 9, Trump declared the war "very complete, pretty much" and said it would end "very soon." He also floated taking over the Strait of Hormuz: "I'm thinking about taking it over."

This produced an oil crash — Brent dropped from its $119.50 peak to approximately $85–88 — a 25% swing on words alone. Pakistan's stock exchange triggered a trading halt on a 9,303-point surge.

Bush landed on the USS Lincoln on May 1, 2003 — 41 days into Iraq — and declared "Mission Accomplished." Trump is doing it on Day 11. Iran has not surrendered, no ceasefire exists, Hormuz remains effectively closed, and planning reportedly extends to 100 days — potentially into September 2026.

The gap between rhetoric and reality is the entire thesis of this primer.

Updated Key Metrics (March 10 vs. Primer Baseline)

Metric	Primer (March 6)	March 10
Oil (Brent)	~$112/bbl	

Metric	Primer (March 6)	March 10
		Peaked $119.50, crashed to $85-88 on Trump comments
US gasoline	~$3.80/gal	$4.00+/gal (crossed $4 threshold)
Hormuz insurance	500%+ increase	1,000%+ increase; carriers canceling entirely
US troops in region	40,000-50,000	50,000+ (largest buildup since 2003)
Pentagon burn rate	~$1.2B/day	~$1.2B/day ($13.2B spent in 11 days)
New Supreme Leader	Pending	Mojtaba Khamenei — installed
Iran internet	~4% of normal	~1% of normal (NetBlocks)
Protests (US)	Growing	50+ cities (March 8)
Protests (global)	Growing	50,000+ in London; 24-26 killed in Pakistan
War powers votes	Pending	Failed: Senate 47-53, House 212-219
Ceasefire	None	Iran rejects; no negotiations
Defense stocks	Rising	Palantir $300B+, RTX, Lockheed, Northrop all at 52-week highs

A NOTE ON HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

This primer is designed to be modular. Individual sections can be used as standalone briefing documents:

- **For a lawmaker's staff**: Parts III (what happened), IV (military realities), and VI (the legal case)
- **For a journalist**: Parts I (the pattern), II (the history Iran remembers), III (the timeline), VII (media failure and surveillance)
- **For an activist organizing against the war**: Parts VIII (the nuclear stakes), IX (what can be done), and the Ellsberg material throughout
- **For someone trying to understand the economics**: Part V (follow the money), with special attention to the petrodollar section and the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint analysis
- **For someone asking "why do people go along?"**: The Milgram section and the Arendt section in Part VII, and the Ellsberg framework throughout
- **For someone asking "why does Iran distrust the United States?"**: Part II (The History Iran Remembers) in its entirety

The *Lied to Death* audiobook remains the essential primary source — drawn from more than forty hours of conversation recorded over ten days at Ellsberg's home in 2015, which has proven prophetic with a specificity that is almost unbearable to witness.

Share this document. The machinery of consent operates through information control. Every person who reads this is one more link in the chain of people who know — and who might decide that knowing is not enough.

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This document was compiled for Arn Menconi as a research briefing for his own understanding and as a potential resource for readers seeking to understand the 2026 Iran war in full context. Original primer current as of March 6, 2026; supplement updated March 10, 2026. Figures and events are evolving rapidly.

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