

# What National Interests Were Served by the Iran War?

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As President Trump continues to attempt to extricate himself from the Iran War, analysts are left to assess what has been gained or lost in fighting it. Certainly, Iran has realized enormous gains. If the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by President Trump on Thursday is representative of the final agreement, Iran will be in a better position on the world stage than it has been at any time since the 1979 revolution.

According to the MOU, the U.S. will lift the economic sanctions it has imposed upon Iran for several decades. It will return \$24 billion in Iranian funds frozen by the U.S. government. Iran will keep its conventional missile capability and some sort of peaceful nuclear program, almost certainly to include uranium enrichment, likely capped at a level far below weapons grade. The U.S. has also pledged to "remove its forces from the proximity of the Islamic Republic of Iran within 30 days after the final deal."

That means the U.S. will not send troops back to the military bases encircling Iran which the U.S. evacuated at the beginning of the war and Iran subsequently bombed into various states of damage or destruction.

Regarding the damage done to Iran by 40 days of bombing by the U.S. and Israel, the U.S. has agreed to "develop a definitive mutually agreed plan with at least USD 300 billion for the reconstruction and economic development of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

As for the United States, it emerges from the war with very little to show for its efforts. Iran agrees not to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, but they have promised as much for the past two decades and submitted to and passed inspections to ensure compliance.

That this "no nukes" clause represents no change in Iran's policy or behavior is reflected in the agreement, which states, "The Islamic Republic of Iran *reaffirms* that it shall not procure or develop nuclear weapons." The word "reaffirms" was likely insisted upon by Iran so that the MOU would reflect what they claim has been their position since suspending their nuclear weapons program over twenty years ago.

Besides this non-concession, no other U.S. demand is satisfied in the MOU. The document is completely silent on Iran's conventional missile program, which the U.S. demanded be curtailed or eliminated at the beginning of the war. Iran's "proxies," Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis are similarly not mentioned. So, Iran is not agreeing to anything regarding their support of those groups.

In fact, the MOU implicitly takes Hezbollah's side, requiring, "immediate and permanent termination of military operations on all fronts, including in Lebanon," and also "ensuring the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Lebanon." This means Israel must withdraw its troops from Lebanon, where they are currently fighting Hezbollah. Lebanon is named three times in the first paragraph to ensure there is no confusion it is part of the deal, as there was at the beginning of the first ceasefire.

These are the kinds of terms imposed on the losers of a war by the winners.

Clearly, no U.S. interests were served by losing the war with Iran. But what if the U.S. had won it? What if the decapitation strategy pursued by the U.S. in March had succeeded, the neocon dream of mass revolt of the Iranian people had taken place, and the mullahs had been deposed? What U.S. national interest would have been served then?

That depends upon how one defines "national interests."

If U.S. national interests means those outcomes which benefit all or a supermajority of the American people, then there really is only one U.S. national interest in the Middle East: that oil flows freely out of the Persian Gulf and into the international oil exchanges, thereby minimizing the price of oil.

The U.S. accounts for roughly 20% of global oil consumption. Regardless of whether the particular oil shipped out of the Persian Gulf is imported into the U.S., maximizing supply to global markets minimizes the price of oil for Americans, other things being equal.

The problem for supporters of the Iran War is that oil was flowing out of the Persian Gulf just fine before the war started. In fact, the only thing preventing maximization of oil supply from the region was U.S. sanctions on Iranian oil. To this war proponents might say that had the U.S. won the war and deposed or neutered the Iranian regime, it would no longer need to maintain those sanctions and thus increase the world supply of oil.

But losing the war has also resulted in the lifting of sanctions. So, the American people benefited in this regard just as much by losing the war as winning it. Obviously, they would have benefited more still if the war had never been fought at all and the sanctions on Iran had been lifted without firing a shot. They wouldn't be on the hook for tens of billions of dollars in additional debt and wouldn't have sustained casualties among their soldiers.

Trump claims his war eliminated Iran as a threat to Israel, the region, and the rest of the world. But they weren't a threat. All international inspections and U.S. intelligence reports confirm that.

Even if Iran were pursuing nuclear weapons and achieved the most hysterical fever dreams of the war hawks - 11 nuclear weapons within a matter of months - what would they do with them? Fire them at Israel, which would respond with 100, followed by the U.S. with perhaps 1,000?

If the war has proven anything, it is that Iran is not suicidal. It has followed a restrained and calculated strategy to defend its existence and impose costs on the U.S. and Israel for attacking it. But nothing we've seen from Iran in the past three months suggests it is an existential threat to Israel, much less the United States, in any realistic way. Even a handful of nuclear weapons would not change that in the face of adversaries possessing hundreds or thousands of them, respectively.

In addition to maximizing the supply of oil flowing from the Persian Gulf, foreign policy realists add "preventing any single power from becoming dominant in the region" as a U.S. interest in the Middle East." Their reasoning is that this development could somehow threaten oil supplies for Americans. But the vague threat of a hostile power "controlling the oil" is undermined by the same economic realities explored above.

Were this imagined boogeyman to make it a policy not to sell its oil to the United States, it would then have to sell it to others, likely at cheaper prices. The unavailability of Middle East oil to Americans would be countered by less competition from for oil from other sources from those buying Middle East oil.

At most, the boogeyman could attempt to do what OPEC did to Americans in the mid-1970s by cutting its output drastically. That caused a spike in oil prices and a short-term gain for OPEC nations at America's expense. But ultimately it motivated behavioral changes by market actors that eventually resulted in the oil gluts of the 1980s. While OPEC still uses supply control to somewhat manage price, it hasn't tried to repeat its 1970s embargo. A modern attempt by the boogeyman might not succeed at all. If it did, it would be short lived.

In the long run, it wouldn't make a lick of difference to the lives of ordinary Americans if Israel, Iran, Syria, or Turkey became a dominant power in the Middle East or if any of them ceased to exist tomorrow. There is sincere sympathy in the U.S. for the Jews of the world to have a homeland, as well as for the currently nationless Palestinians. But viewed through the ruthless lens of national interest, these are meaningless sentimentalities.

Similarly, whether Iran is a fundamentalist theocracy ruled by the mullahs or a "democracy" as defined by Western progressives makes absolutely no difference in the lives of American citizens. Neither, frankly, is it any of their business. The only legitimate interest Americans have in any of the countries their government currently interferes with is whether it poses a security threat to their homeland or is a potential trading partner.

Iran, like virtually every nation on the planet, is the latter, not the former.

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