

Iran's Fortitude Is Its Decisive Edge

The ayatollahs want to fight and have a greater tolerance than Trump for pain.

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Tehran has a wartime advantage over Washington because the ruling Iranian elite wants to fight and has been willing to endure far more pain than Donald Trump has.

The revolutionary faithful have embraced these tests time and time again. In the 1980s, the [Iran](#)-Iraq war claimed hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives and nearly broke the

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The recent Syrian civil war gave a new generation the opportunity to prove itself. Today's conflict with the U.S. and Israel lets senior guard commanders, lowly IRGC foot soldiers and the rest of the theocracy's security forces feel the fraternity of resistance against the regime's enemies.

For a dictatorship that lost most Iranians' loyalty years ago, these wars were a boon. The zeal of the revolutionary faithful has baffled many Iranian expatriates and analysts, who see a morally, spiritually and financially bankrupt regime.

Team Trump believed that a battered, broken Islamic Republic could be defanged through sustained bombing. The Israelis cited the regime's fragility and the possibility that decapitation could lead to collapse.

When the crack-up didn't happen, the war's disappointments led some in the Trump administration to entertain the illusions that once guided the American left's engagement with the theocracy. [Vice President JD Vance](#), the administration's point man on talks with Iran, returned from his encounter and said: "You talk about hard-liners and moderates. What's fascinating to me about their system is that we're seeing even people that I would have assumed are hard-liners who are kind of saying, 'You know what? Maybe it was a mistake for us to do the things that we've done over the last 40 years. Maybe we should turn over a new leaf in the relationship with the United States of America.'" Even John Kerry would have known better.

Mr. Vance's counterparts, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the speaker of Parliament and a former IRGC general, and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, long the IRGC's diplomat of choice, are revolutionaries ready to out negotiate their enemies in person. They aren't encumbered by the conservative Shiite sentiment that sees Western infidels as untouchable.

For nearly half a century, successive American presidents have viewed the Islamic Republic as a collection of competing factions, with "moderates" and "hard-liners" struggling for control. If Washington somehow pulled the right lever, the thinking went, it could produce a better Iran, where sensible Islamist-lite nationalists could gain power. Barack Obama's rationale for his nuclear deal was founded on this hoped-for triumph of Iranian "pragmatists."

Unfortunately for Mr. Trump, the Iranian regime isn't divided. It is probably more unified and determined than at any time since Saddam Hussein invaded in 1980. The bloodbath that ended the popular insurrection in January 2026 resulted from the brutality of Iranian security services and the unity of the ruling elite. There was no daylight among the Islamists in charge when it came to killing rebellious citizens.

The regime has been clever as well as bloodthirsty. The most fervently religious have, at least for now, decided not to protest the new hijab-lite approach, which lets women uncover their heads without fear of beatings and imprisonment. Iran's leaders are betting, at least after the bloodshed in January, that this concession won't be a slippery slope.

Since the U.S. began Operation Epic Fury in February, the Iranian regime has been clear about its intentions, especially regarding the Strait of Hormuz. As Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi [warned](#) last month, "any valid framework must be based on coordination with Iran and the provisions of the Islamabad memorandum of understanding; otherwise, such parallel routes will be suspended." Mr. Vance and fellow negotiators Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff surely had access to Persian speakers at the State Department or Langley who could have told them what [paragraph 5](#) of the memorandum of understanding meant in Tehran.

The crisis in the Persian Gulf won't be solved by Washington's bombing more targets or offering more financial concessions to Tehran. Pipelines built to avoid the strait can help but won't measurably diminish the Persian Gulf's centrality to global commerce. The U.S. Navy must reclaim the Gulf and patrol it indefinitely despite the hazards. Tehran doesn't believe Washington has the fortitude for such a mission. As long as it's right, the Islamic Republic, not the U.S., will be the most consequential power in the Middle East.

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