



# The First Post-Heroic American War: The “Boots on the Ground” Syndrome

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The most recent – though unlikely to be the last – war between the US and Iran was fought by an American president whose irresolution allowed a critically weakened Iran to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The fear of “boots on the ground”, unjustified though it was by the reality of the conflict, has emboldened America’s most committed and resolute enemy to double down on its catastrophic national and international policies.

Both those who criticize and those who loyally support Trump’s “deal” with Iran – which is hardly a fully explicit agreement; indeed it remains vague on key points – are all careful to avoid any mention of the critical factor that caused the abandonment of what could have been the last US-Iran war.

When the latest but probably not the last Iran war started on February 28, 2026, the first victims, for once, were not innocent bystanders but rather Iran’s rulers and executioners: the supreme dictator Ali Khamenei, Chief of the General Staff and head of Iran’s Armed Forces General Abdolrahim Mousavi, Minister of Defense General [Aziz Nasirzadeh](#), Head of Military Research and Development Hossein Jabal Amelian, his predecessor Brigadier General [Reza Mozaffari Nia](#), the Minister of Intelligence, his deputy for Israel affairs Yahya Hosseini Panjaki, other officials, and private citizen Mojtaba Khamenei – son of Ali Khamenei but utterly unqualified for the emphatically non-hereditary

supreme leader position. Mojtaba has not been seen since the bombing and is likely mutilated if still alive.

Iran's furious response to this mass decapitation was to launch ballistic missiles at not just Israel and US bases in the region but also at mere bystanders. Of the 1,471 missiles Iran launched from February 28 until April 20, 2026, some 650 were aimed at Israel, 563 landed in the territory of the United Arab Emirates (which has long helped Iran's wrecked economy), 265 landed in Kuwait (where some US aircraft are based but which has always come to Iran's aid), 215 attacked Qatar (which shares its vast natural gas field with Iran and which has never harmed Iran), 194 struck Bahrain (the US Navy's main regional base), and 135 were aimed at Saudi Arabia, despite its complete neutrality.

Iran's primitive missiles were much less lethal than the German V2s of 1944, some 3,225 of which killed more than 7,000 people in England and Belgium. However, with their huge masses of metal, they still managed to inflict a great deal of property damage, even if their warheads did not explode. The older and more abundant Kheibar Shekan weighs 17 metric tons and has a 750 kg warhead; the newer and larger Khorramshahr weighs close to 20 tons and delivers multiple warheads weighing up to 1,500 kg.

Iran's 650 missiles aimed at Israel achieved the destruction of many buildings but killed only 27 civilians and one off-duty IDF soldier (though approximately 3,000 more were injured across the country, some seriously).

While Iran attacked civilians with its highly inaccurate missiles, both the US and Israel relied on extreme precision to destroy underground missile assembly plants and detect and destroy missile launchers, rocket fuel depots and mixing plants. These Iranian assets were the result of many years of very high spending, largely funded by the diversion of funds urgently needed to provide water supplies to Iran's second city Mashad, historic Yazd, and other cities, but above all to Tehran. According to Iran's only elected leader, President Masoud Pezeshkian, Tehran might even have to be evacuated.

As the water supply budgets did not suffice to finance the Revolutionary missile industries, the nation's electrical generation funds were also diverted for that purpose, as was the funding needed to pipe the country's unlimited natural gas supplies to its cities. As a result, last winter and into March when

the war started, the horribly polluting substance *mazout*, or residual oil, had to be burned to keep Tehran's people from freezing because neither electrical nor gas heating was sufficient.

The regime was thus on the brink of systemic failure on the eve of the war. It has now been saved by the way the war was fought – and not fought.

The mass decapitation of February 28 allowed the surviving Revolutionary Guards officers to take over in Tehran, very much as the SS did in Berlin after Hitler's death on April 30, 1945, eagerly killing anyone who wanted to surrender until Russian troops arrived two days later.

But this time, no troops were approaching Tehran. This would have been an impossible mission because of geography alone. No one in his right mind would contemplate an advance over 800 miles/1,300 kilometers of desert and mountains on the only road from the Bandar Abbas on the Gulf coast to Tehran, with its 13 million people. If only a tenth of that population still supported the regime – and that many are salaried in the army, police, part-time militia, Revolutionary Guards, and the *Bonyad* foundations, which own much of the economy – a long season of urban warfare would have begun.

No such invasion plan had been suggested by anyone, so there was no justification for the preemptive “boots on the ground” hysteria loudly manifest from isolationist backwaters and White House Vice Presidential staffers alike. As it turns out, the hysteria generated by wholly imaginary invasion plans had very real consequences that in fact determined the outcome of the war.

To understand how fear of a non-event brought about a veritable defeat, one must return to the other military action that occurred just before the February 28 start of the bombing. It seems a very long time ago now, because at the time, everyone in the White House would have laughed at the suggestion that President Trump would ever come to terms with the Revolutionary Guards.

Some 3,000 paratroopers of the rapid-response force of the 82 Airborne Division were sent to the Gulf to join the 5,000 Marines of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> Marine expeditionary units already there. They were more than enough to counter the entirely predictable – and predicted – Revolutionary Guard response to the bombing, which was to try to stop the flow of tankers and bulk carriers

delivering crude oil, liquified natural gas, and fertilizer down the narrow seaways in the mostly shallow Persian Gulf from Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar, and partly from Saudi Arabia (which sends half its oil by pipeline to the Red Sea) and the United Arab Emirates (which uses a pipeline to the Indian Ocean to send half its oil).

The Revolutionary Guards could not attack the tankers and bulk carriers with their warships, attack boats or submarines, as they had all been sunk soon after the bombing started. But they could endanger navigation by dropping sea mines from any traditional dhow or fishing vessel and even by attacking passing tankers with anti-tank missiles. That would be enough to cause insurance companies to suspend their coverage, thereby stopping Persian Gulf supplies to the world economy.

The airborne troops and Marines could have been highly effective here, as ample helicopter transport was available to take up positions for hours or days on uninhabited Persian Gulf islands and deserted coastal tracts to secure nearby navigable channels. They could have safely engaged enemy forces of any size, as tactical air support was only minutes away to minimize combat risk.

When Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu asked the US for assured resupplies of aerial munitions to start the preemptive bombing of Iran's ballistic missiles to avoid the danger of an all-out attack that could overwhelm Israel's defenses, he was surprised and pleased by Trump's decision to join in and take command of the offensive. He did not pause to consider the possibility that he was forming an alliance with a weaker power that would ultimately let him down.

By February 28, 2026, a total of 1,150 Israeli soldiers and local security officers had been killed since the war started on October 7, 2023. Given the 1:34 population ratio, that is equivalent to 39,100 dead US soldiers.

Netanyahu, who was widely unpopular even before the war, was politically unaffected by the loss of more than a thousand soldiers. But 1,150 killed in action – let alone 39,100 – would have ended the Trump presidency amid coast-to-coast mass protests and a fast impeachment with enough Republican votes.

This war, then, was fought by an irresolute president who has not only allowed America's worst enemies to come out the winners despite their utterly

disastrous national policies, primitive missile engineering, and clumsy military operations, but has also degraded US military strength down to European levels, because troops that cannot be risked in combat even for great gains are of little military value.

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