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WEBINAR

WAR IN IRAN: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

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PANEL DISCUSSION

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O'HANLON: Greetings everyone, and welcome to our Brookings discussion of war in Iran: what comes next? I'm Michael O'Hanlon with the Foreign Policy program, and I'm honored to be moderating this conversation with a cast of characters that has remarkable experience across the US government and scholarship on this subject.

So we're looking forward to getting right into it. I'm not gonna begin as I might usually with a history of the US-Iran relationship or of the American concern with the Iranian nuclear program, although both of these things are longstanding and very serious and have troubled many presidents prior to President Trump. I think it's safe to say though, as one broad word of introduction, that most of us probably see both considerable promise and considerable peril in where we are in the current crisis with Iran, and I think indeed it is a war now with Iran.

And so we'll flesh out many of those dimensions. I'm gonna begin with my good friend and colleague, Phil Gordon, who was national security advisor to Vice President Kamala Harris most recently. Prior to that, he had worked as assistant secretary of state for Europe and as Middle East coordinator during the Obama administration, and has written important books on the Middle East, including a long history of, or a very concise but thorough history of how regime change has previously worked for the United States in this region.

After I speak with Phil to begin, I'll go to Mara Karlin, assistant secretary of defense in the Biden administration, who worked a great deal on US military strategy, thinking about the prioritization of different parts of the world where we might do less, where we might do more, where we might be able perhaps to reduce our footprint in the Middle East, which after all has been a goal of most presidents for a very long time, and yet never seems to quite turn out to be possible. And so we'll look forward to not only hearing her thoughts on the Middle East, but on the repercussions of this military operation for US defense preparedness around the world.

Jeffrey Feldtan was assistant secretary of state for the Middle East during the Obama administration, and then he became the senior American working in the UN system where he was the undersecretary general for political affairs, meaning he was in charge of trying to help the UN's role in overseeing resolution of a lot of conflicts, or at least mitigation through negotiation. He has therefore a lot of experience with the Middle East, and he may be one of the last Americans ever to have seen the Ayatollah in person a number of years ago. An anecdote that perhaps we'll get into in this conversation as well.

And Suzanne Maloney, in addition to being the vice president and director of the Foreign Policy studies program at Brookings, is one of the world's top experts on Iran, has studied it her entire career, written the definitive book on Iran's political economy through the early decades of the Islamic Republic, and has been writing a great deal to help us understand internal power dynamics throughout the Iranian regime and who knows what may follow.

So with that introduction, thank you for joining us. We'll have a bit of a conversation amongst ourselves for about 35, 40 minutes and then look forward to your questions.

And Phil, I wanted to begin with you and ask us to, or ask you to help us understand which of the missions that have been articulated by President Trump for what we're trying to achieve, which of the objectives are going well, which are more realistic, which may cause us some concern? We've been hearing about destroying the nuclear program, destroying

missiles, destroying the navy, preventing Iran from shutting down the Strait of Hormuz, and of course changing leadership and inducing a revolution. How do you feel about these various objectives? Looking forward to your thoughts, over to you.

GORDON: Great, thank you Mike, and good afternoon everybody. And Mike, I'm glad you started there with the missions and I'm kind of glad you gave us the big list too, because one of the striking things to me about this entire episode or war—'cause I agree we should call it a war—is the administration has really struggled, I think, to provide a clear and consistent message about what this is all about. It's not to say you can't have multiple missions at the same time, but it's been a moving target.

I mean, there've been times when this was almost exclusively about Iran's nuclear program. And the so-called armada we sent to the region was to either deal with that program or force them into a nuclear negotiation. You've heard the president say Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon. But then at other moments, even a comprehensive nuclear deal wouldn't be enough. It would have to also cover ballistic missiles, terrorism, support for proxies, navy. In fact, today, even if in the past they sometimes said, Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon, just today, the White House put out a statement that listed missiles, the navy, and proxies in that order, and then finally got to nuclear weapons at the end.

And then most important, I think is, is what you also flagged: regime change. To what degree is that the mission of this military conflict? And there too, I think they've kind of been all over the place. In a way you could argue it started with that. Because think about the context: you know, last summer the US, following Israel, used significant military force to take out Iran's nuclear program and the president declared it obliterated.

And honestly, between then and January of this year, we didn't hear a whole lot of talk about the Iranian threat, and certainly the Iranian nuclear program. It was only when Iranian protestors started to rise up in the early part of this year and Trump in mid-January said, help is on the way, rise up and take your institutions, but they didn't have the forces in place to back up that statement, that we sent the forces into place. So in that sense, providing an ability to support Iranian protestors was kind of the proximate cause of getting us where we are today. And in Trump's statement on February 28th, which kinda seems an eternity ago, but I think it was only like four days ago, he also called on the Iranian people to, he said, you know, you hour, the hour of freedom is at hand and take over your government. So in that sense, like, this is also about regime change. But then as I said today, they put out a statement that didn't cover regime change. And there have been times in the last few days where Trump said, you know, he could imagine a new leader who wants to talk and we do a deal.

So I think, you know, it's important to, to, to say all of that because -- oh, and by the way, I didn't even mention the latest twist on the mission, which is that this was a preemptive strike because—this gets complicated here, right? Iran was gonna attack Israel because Iran knew Israel wants to attack Iran, and if they did that, we would be vulnerable too. I think Senator Cotton even said there was an existential threat to Israel, so we were acting to stave that off. That seems to me to make the least sense of all. But you know, it's all over and we still, I think, haven't really settled on the clearest objective.

All of that is also, I think, important to underscore, because that last one just seems to me the least plausible. When the president announced that we were launching this war four days ago, he said it was to deal with an imminent threat to the United States. And that to me

is the most questionable of all. In fact, I would actually argue that the threat from Iran, while real, is both less imminent and less powerful than it has been for quite some time. Because the last two years, including three major exchanges with the United States and Israel, have significantly knocked back Iran's military capabilities, proxies, ballistic missiles, air defenses, and nuclear program. So pinning this on an imminent threat to the United States seems least persuasive at all. And in that sense, this was entirely a war of choice by the president, which means that he owns the consequences even more than he otherwise would.

O'HANLON: Thank you, that was excellent. Your phrasing at the end leads naturally to a follow-up question that I'd like to pose before going to Mara, which is, speaking of wars of choice, the last big war of choice the United States embarked on was arguably the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which also had a number of motivations and potential benefits if it went well, but of course it wound up being very difficult and protracted. But at least, I'll say one thing for President George W. Bush, he did ask Congress to weigh in before he went to war in this case.

And by the way, President Trump's got company. There are plenty of post-World War II presidents who haven't asked for authorization on the use of force in various missions, but nonetheless, in this case, President Trump has elected to begin a potentially open-ended conflict without consulting Congress. Do you believe that he should now, and if so, should Congress think hard about trying to circumscribe the US mission going forward to focus on some of the objectives that you just discussed, but not others? And perhaps, for example, ruling out the possibility of ground troops being inserted into Iran. Any guidance that you would offer for Congress?

GORDON: Yeah, I guess my shortest answer to that, Mike, is that to say it's a bit late. I mean, should we advise the president to go to Congress now that, that we're in the middle of a major war that is escalating and drawing in numerous countries throughout the region while US is undertaking significant military operations?

I do believe that this war should have been authorized by Congress, that there is not an international or domestic legal basis for this conflict. But those questions should have been asked before the war started, not, you know, several days into the war. It doesn't mean Congress shouldn't address it now, but it's way too late.

I think you're right to underscore, as controversial as it was, the, the George W. Bush administration went to Congress. They went to the UN Security Council and they got a, a, a mandate from Congress to launch that war.

Other cases have been controversial too, and presidents, you know, I've worked in the executive branch a number of times and, and want presidents to have as much flexibility as possible too to deter and to leverage diplomacy with force. And presidents have stretched that. I think, you know, we went too far using the 2002 AUMFs for different operations. We've done Libya making the case that it wasn't really a war, but none of that comes close to what we are doing now: a war of choice using, you know, air power, naval power, ballistic missiles, B-2s, responding to the response from Iran. That is a, a massive contrast, even with the Iraq war, which was not only authorized by Congress, but significantly debated in the American public with hearings in Congress and a sustained case by the administration. Whether you liked it or not, they made it.

So, I guess Mike, uh, sure Congress should debate it now, but it it's way too late. This should have been debated and authorized before we launched the operation.

O'HANLON: Thank you, Phil. Mara, I'd like to go now to you with a two-part question. My second one is gonna be about the implications for our global military posture and preparedness of this conflict in Iran.

But first, could we talk a little bit about the specifics of what's happening now and out of the mission set that you've seen delineated by the president and that Phil and I have just been talking about which of those strike you as more militarily attainable and realistic, which may prove a bridge too far, or at least you know, a case where the odds are against us.

KARLIN: Thanks very much, Mike. I think Phil did a really nice job outlining the dim sum menu of reasons that have allegedly triggered this, this conflict. What we have seen is the US military, which really is the most capable military in the history of the world, doing the sort of thing it does best, which is a high-end conventional conflict.

It spent about 30 days setting the theater. That means it's flowed a whole bunch of assets and platforms and people to the Middle East. And then it has done this, it has executed this massive, multi-domain effort going across cyber space, maritime, air, you really, you, you name it. And they've dropped tens of thousands of ordinance so far, hitting at least more than a thousand plus targets in line with the Israeli military.

There've been a wide range of targets. Usually you think of target sets in terms of people or places. So, number of people, of course, that we have, we have followed, including the supreme leader and a number of places in particular, not just military, but also really institutions focused on, on the regime. And, and that, so that, that has had a really transformative impact operationally.

Where I think this gets a little bit trickier is as we think about the next phase here and what else can actually happen. So, while the Iranians have retaliated with probably around a thousand or so missile, missile attacks across Israel and across the Gulf, most of those have actually been intercepted. Most of those have had, not had much of an impact. That's actually an extraordinary thing. And it's based on an integrated air and missile defense system that really started in the Bush and then Obama administrations and has continued.

But here's where this gets a lot trickier and gets at the heart of your question, Mike, which is what else the Iranians have been able to and will continue to be able to throw at the U.S. military, the Israeli military and others. And that's frankly, drones. Drones are a whole lot harder to target because they're really slow and they're often small. If you saw, the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh was hit yesterday. Six U.S. troops so far have died because of drone attacks. We've seen a number of soft targets like airports, hotels, all getting hit by by them as as well. So I think that piece is going to make this actually a much trickier situation going forward for the U.S. military.

There's the potential that there may be a need for a non-combatant evacuation. So there's hundreds of thousands of Americans in the Middle East, and so there may be a request by the U.S. military to take them out. Jeff Feltman lived this as ambassador to Lebanon, and I did in 2006 running the Levant desk in the, in the Pentagon. That's a huge mission. So effectively, what the U.S. military has done in its first phase in many ways plays to its

comparative advantages. This second phase as this war continues, does much, much less so and is going to get a bit trickier.

O'HANLON: Specific point that I'm wondering about your thoughts about, Caitlin Talmadge and I just wrote a piece basically saying the historical record of trying to induce regime change from the air is, is almost hopeless. And in this case, I think it's even harder than in most cases 'cause there is no real armed opposition that's been organized. Do you share my skepticism that an air power-only American role here can really induce a revolution?

KARLIN: It can induce change. And, you know, this is where I think it's really useful for us to use analogies. So if you picture a continuum, you've got the Maduro raid, which decapitates the regime. If you go all the way to the other end, you've got the Iraq War, which completely destroys a regime and totally transform its institutions.

So air power can potentially do the first, it definitely can't do the last, and so we've gotta figure out where in the middle are we going to be. Especially as you know, there does not appear to be any meaningful armed opposition.

O'HANLON: So could we talk for a minute about the implications of what's going on in this war for broader American defense preparedness, deterrence of China vis-a-vis Taiwan, ability to help Ukraine fend off Russian attack?

I guess first and foremost on my mind would be whether we're gonna run out of air and missile defense interceptors, but there are other kinds of capabilities that may be at risk here, too, of being used up in one part of the world or another. Could you speak to that please?

KARLIN: Absolutely. So even though the U.S. military is incredibly powerful and has a budget of about 900 billion, which may even get a couple hundred billion bigger, fundamentally, it has finite resources and finite assets and platforms.

And I think this is where we're gonna start to see some real challenges. So you note in particular this real issue with interceptors and with munitions. That's absolutely a concern, not least because you're, you're using relatively similar munitions when you are looking at different types of conflicts, and so you've got a finite supply. There's been a real investment in the defense industrial base over the last few years, but it like took too long to get started and it's way too slow moving, as well.

Moreover, there's a really fat posture now inside the Middle East, of course, right? We've got multiple carrier strike groups that are sitting in the, that are, that are sitting in the Middle East. A whole lot of air power there as well. Not only are those not able to shift to another region, you're also losing their readiness as they are being used, right? And so you're not going to be able to quickly shift them to other challenges as well.

So look, fundamentally, the U.S. military can often find ways to walk it and chew gum. It just gets really hard to do so, and the costs can only increase.

I'll, I'll wrap with just one case study. If you remember when the military was, was facing a whole bunch of Houthis attacks about a year, year or so ago, a year and a half ago, you

actually ended up seeing, because of readiness concerns, a whole bunch of accidents in, in the Navy because folks were at operating at such a busy operations tempo.

O'HANLON: Thank you. And I know we all wanna thank our men and women in uniform, as well as brave diplomats around the world, and send condolences to the families who have lost people. And we hope and pray there isn't too much more, uh, casualty, you know, events along the way, going forward, but all are cognizant that there could be.

So Jeff, that leads me to you and to a discussion of broader dynamics in the Middle East, an area that you've worked on from multiple dimensions with multiple hats. And I know you're studying carefully the dynamics that involve the Gulf States that involve Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon. So could you speak to the one or two or three that maybe are most interesting to watch right now that are being most rapidly either jeopardized or transformed, or maybe there are new opportunities arising? How do you see the region?

FELTMAN: Thanks Mike. And it's great to, to be on this panel with, with, um, with Mara, Suzanne, and, and Phil, and your, and your expert moderation. If we were having a panel in the Middle East a couple of weeks ago before the, you know, even, even as the drums of war were starting to beat, the nuclear diplomacy with Iran was, was, was going on, we would've talked about Gaza and the Board of Peace, and we would've talked about two rivalries, two growing tensions that were affecting not only the, not only the Middle East, but also the Horn of Africa, Sudan, and that is the growing rivalry and tensions between Israel and Turkey, and the growing rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

Those were two trends that had big impacts on developments in the region. Now, today, those two rivalries are changing because of this war. The Israel-Turkish rivalry, which is playing out in Syria and elsewhere, is probably gonna get worse. It's probably gonna get more acute because of the Kurdish question. We've seen that President Trump has reached out to Kurdish leaders. We've heard president, we've heard Prime Minister Netanyahu talk about the Kurdish role in, in, in Iran. The last thing Turkey wants to do is to see another nascent Kurdish independence movement grow out of, of Iran. So I think that we're gonna see worsening of that Turkish- Israeli tensions that were already there.

On the other hand, the Abu Dhabi-Riyadh tensions and rivalry that were playing out in Somalia, in Sudan, in Yemen, probably are alleviated, at least for now, because there's a certain solidarity in trying to, trying to protect the Gulf areas, the energy resources from, from the Iranian reactions to the Israeli-American airstrikes, to this, to this war.

And then there's Lebanon. You mentioned Lebanon. Lebanon's fascinating to watch right now. Hezbollah has launched a suicide, a suicide mission in launching and starting attacks on Israel on Monday with, with six rocket strikes. They've even sent a drone into the Akrotiri airbase, the British airbase in Cyprus. This tells me that Hezbollah has been transformed entirely to an IRGC subset. Hezbollah was more or less a Lebanese and an Iranian agent at once, but with, but now, it's, the Iranian part of Hezbollah has prevailed. Because the Lebanese Shia, Lebanese government in general, Lebanese people in general are sick of war. They don't, they didn't want to bring into war, but yet Hezbollah fired onto Israel and, and, and basically gave Israel the excuse for plans Israel already had, had in place. At the same time that the Lebanese cabinet, with some of the Shia support of some of the Shia ministers, allied with Nabih Berri, the Parliament speaker, voted to outlaw Hezbollah military activity. So you have very, you have very encouraging political developments inside, inside Lebanon where you have a growing consensus about the unacceptability of Hezbollah's

weapons. But you still have Hezbollah answering the call from the IRGC to attack, to attack Israel for, and again, suicidal purposes.

Final thought is Yemen. It's very interesting. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the head of Ansar Allah, the Houthi political party, has given two speeches condemning what's happening in Iran, condemning the war, condemning the United States, et cetera, his death to Israel, death to America rhetoric, but has not, the Houthis have not yet launched anything in support. That's a space to watch.

O'HANLON: Thank you. I have one more question for you before going to Suzanne, and it's a little bit of a tangent, but it relates to the, since you had met the Ayatollah Khamenei several years ago because you were in a UN job where maybe it was more plausible to do that than as a U.S. official, and because we've now seen a state sponsored assassination of this man, it's a, it raises the question about thoughts you may have on the changing norm against assassinating political leaders around the world. For many decades I think, it's, it's fair to conclude that the world community, generally, people, even when they were fighting each other, were thinking about fighting each other, didn't want to target leadership, partly 'cause they were worried about retribution retaliation against themselves.

Just in the last day or so, President Trump has said, well, at least I got the ayatollah before he got me. And in fairness to President Trump's viewpoint, whether the ayatollah and the Iranians were behind the 2024 assassination attempts on Mr. Trump or not, they certainly have killed a lot of Americans. And ever since 2020 they've been trying to kill the chain of command that led to the death of Qasem Soleimani, their terrorist mastermind. So you've watched a lot of brutal politics in the Middle East. Do you have any thoughts about this changing evolution and how we think about targeting leadership around the world, but specifically within the Middle East?

FELTMAN: I'm sure it felt very good for Trump to be able to say Khamenei is dead, or for the Israeli strikes, I'm sure it felt very good, but what's, but what, in the end, did we accomplish? We created a, we created the martyr who was, who was, I mean, his, his clock was ticking already, you know, at 86 years old with, with health issues. And he's had 37, almost 37 years to embed layers of his supporters throughout the, throughout the system. So I think that there's-- I don't, I don't think that, this is not, this is not a Maduro Venezuela thing that, you know, the, the example Mara had on, on, in one of her hands, because the system has a deep bench that goes far beyond Khamenei.

So I felt, I feel like this was a gratuitously illegal act that probably felt good given that Khamenei was the epicenter of everything that we find alarming about Iranian practices, be they domestic repression, be they regional decentralization, be they the nuclear program. But I don't believe in the end that killing Khamenei was decisive in what's gonna happen in in Iran, although I defer to Suzanne's greater knowledge and also, I, I believe it erodes the sort of international, international standards that has kept the world, not completely safe, but at least it's prevented, you know, a global war, a global conflagration for the last, for the last 80 years.

One last word on, on Khamenei. People like Suzanne who have, who have studied him for years were sort of my guide when I ended up in that meeting with Khamenei, a restricted meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, I was his plus one and notetaker in that meeting. And what Suzanne and others have written about Khamenei over the years, what they've studied was exactly what I saw in person. I actually was in three meetings with him,

but the one that was the most important was that was this private one with Ban Ki-moon, where he, his whole identity and the identity of the Islam Republic that he represented was wrapped in, was wrapped up in enmity about the United States. I mean, we, you know, despite whatever gaps we had about Iran—we haven't had a diplomatic mission there in years, people didn't regularly have dialogue, we didn't meet with Khamenei—we got it right about who this person was.

O'HANLON: That sets up naturally the conversation to go to you, Suzanne, and I'd welcome your thoughts on anything we've been discussing and everything, but specifically the future of Iranian politics, how you handicap the different possibilities and also what we can and should try to do about it to influence things in a direction that would be better for the United States.

If you want, you can break up that question into two pieces, and I'll come back with the question about US policy options in a minute, but how do you handicap the basic distribution of power and the dynamics of power within Iran right now? Thanks.

MALONEY: Thanks, Mike, and thanks to all my colleagues because this has just been a great discussion and I'm learning a lot just from listening to all of you.

You know, look, I, I think we have to acknowledge that the, the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was received with great joy among many Iranians inside Iran and, and of course many in the diaspora around the world as well.

Khamenei was a brutal man. He had institutionalized his own power throughout his 37 years in office. He had succeeded the founder of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. And at the time many perceived that Khamenei himself was kind of weak. He wasn't terribly charismatic. But what wasn't fully appreciated then was how he had built a relationship with the security services in the military during a largely ceremonial role in the revolution's first years. He spent a lot of time at the front during the Iran-Iraq War, and he used that relationship as well as his ability to build a network of representatives in offices that were insinuated in every part of the administrative state of the Islamic Republic to really determine the course of Iranian policy on essentially every issue.

And so even over the course of, of his time as the, the ultimate authority, Iran has a lot of debates. It was a, it was a, a very diverse revolution that brought this state to power. And so there has always been a degree of political dissent within the system itself. Khamenei ruled with, with an iron fist, and he ensured that no efforts to try to reform the system or to try to create more of an opening to the international community and to the United States in particular, could succeed. And you know, at every point when Iran could have moved in a more tolerant, more liberal and more prosperous direction, Khamenei ensured that that did not happen.

And that culminated, of course, in January with the absolutely horrific crackdown as Iranians came to the streets for the, as they had done on countless occasions, especially over the course of the past eight years. In January, the, the reported numbers or confirmed numbers are at least 7,000 killed in a matter of only several days. And the real numbers are probably at least several orders of magnitude larger than that. And so Khamenei's passing, elimination is, is an opening for Iran and it's a breakthrough for the United States and Israel to promote some kind of change in Iran.

But I think what we've seen play out and, and all of my colleagues have spoken to this, is just this lack of clarity about what the U.S. is actually trying to accomplish. And I worry greatly that what we're going to see is a, a sense of betrayal on the Iranian people, not for the first time, of course, from the United States. President Trump has said today that he's not interested in advancing the possibility of someone like Reza Pahlavi the, who was the, the son of the former shah, who has become a rallying point for many outside Iran and including many also inside Iran. In fact, President Trump anticipates that he will, um, work with someone from within Iran. And I think that's a realistic posture, very realistic posture.

The regime, as Mara and others have said in the past few moments, is deeply embedded. It is well armed. There is no political mobilization within the country that can really take up what President Trump said on Saturday and, and again in January, that that Iranians should simply go and take over their, over their government. That's just not a, a, a, a meaningful or realistic option, given the brutality and the overwhelming dominance of this system. And so we're going to be left with some kind of bloodied, battered, rump version of the Islamic Republic led by officials who are now even more determined to try to cling to power, and we're going to be more confident of the fact that they're able to stay because they have withstood this terrible crisis.

O'HANLON: Do you think, Suzanne, that it's likely the retaliation from the remaining regime will continue in the current character with air, missile, drone attacks against interests and countries and U.S. assets in the Middle East, or do you think it's likely that Iran will tap back into the old playbook of truck bombings and assassinations around the planet and that things could even get worse?

MALONEY: Well, I think their playbook is quite diverse and well developed over the course of the past 47 years, but what they have seen, even in the, the recent days, and of course in prior episodes of tensions with their neighbors and with the international community, is that retaliation, especially where it imposes economic costs on countries with greater resources and greater opportunities than Iran might have available to it, is quite effective in persuading the United States and other parties to try to drive towards some kind of a solution.

And so we saw this in the aftermath of President Trump's decision to walk away from the Iran nuclear deal back in 2018. Iran began escalating a year later. Its neighbors were, were in fact advocating for some kind of a, a different relationship and, and forged a different relationship in the, in the case of the Saudis at that time. We see, we are seeing this again. What they can demonstrate is the ability to shut down commerce, to threaten the economic transformation of countries like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia away from an oil-based economy toward more investment in tourism, in high tech. And all it takes is a few drones into airports and into data centers to throw that off course.

They can also, of course, have a wider effect on the global economy. We've seen that shipping in the Strait of Hormuz has largely stopped at this point, and they don't even need to use military force to do that. Simply the, the, the risk profile for shipping companies and for insurance companies is going to be so high that they, that they can have a real effect on the price of natural gas in Europe, for example, as well as potentially over time, more of an impact even on prices at the pump here in the United States.

We have seen a real impact in terms of those economic tools and, and you know, from the Iranian's perspective, they want to make their neighbors who have, they see as complicit in these attacks pay in the same way that the Iranian people have been forced to pay as a

result of these strikes. So I think we're, they will rely primarily on that strategy, but we can't rule out wider radicalization, the possibility of lone wolf attacks, and or sympathizers around the world who might seek to engage in terrorism simply in sympathy forthe Islamic Republic.

It's going to be a very dangerous and I think messy devolution of this conflict.

O'HANLON: I would just note in passing, before I come back to one more question for you and then go back to the panel, that I think the idea of Iran trying to shut down the Strait of Hormuz or complicate shipping gets to be a very, very interesting problem in military analysis. And I don't know if Mara would agree with me. There are a lot of things about that scenario where we have the upper hand. Certainly sinking the Iranian navy is something well within the capacity of the United States. On the other hand, the IRGC putting mines out into waters via speedboats, that kind of more, you know, covert or gray area if you will, or small-scale kind of operation, could be hard for us to prevent entirely just by standoff aircraft.

To the extent one speculates about possible future scenarios, I don't think we're gonna march on Tehran with the U.S. Army, but I could imagine some coastal presence inside of Iran to try to prevent the IRGC from threatening the Strait of Hormuz. Who knows where this goes, but I'm just throwing out those military scenarios, and Mara can correct me in a minute if she wishes.

But, but the real question I have for everyone, starting with Suzanne and then I'll just go back through the panel starting with Phil after that, is what recommendation would you offer right now, not necessarily for a comprehensive strategy for how to deal with Iran for the next decade, that's asking a lot in a remaining 25 minutes of our Zoom, but an adjustment that you think we need to make, or a refinement or maybe a, a limitation we need to place on our current approach. Or as you wrote recently in Foreign Affairs just today, Suzanne, how do we think about which parts of the Iranian regime to try to negotiate with or talk to if and when that becomes possible? So let me put that question first to you. If I could, Suzanne?

MALONEY: Sure. I will give just two points and then turn it to my colleagues, who I'm sure will have better ideas. I think first and foremost, we've gotta be really clear in articulating publicly to the American people, but also to our partners and allies in the region, about precisely what it is we're trying to accomplish. And if we're not trying to accomplish regime change, we also have to acknowledge that it's gotta be clear to the American people what this is all for and what the end state that we're trying to achieve might be.

I think the other important point is the one that I did try to make in Foreign Affairs today, is that we are going to be dealing with some version of this regime in the aftermath of this conflict. We can't go back to status quo ante. It was shocking, frankly, to see the president pivot away from his notable sympathy toward Iranians who were protesting on the street in January to resume nuclear negotiations, especially because he had "obliterated" the nuclear program by his own word. And in reality, Iran was no longer enriching uranium for the first time in more than two decades. The priority for the aftermath of this conflict has to be creating the incentive structure, and that includes both the possibilities of openings, but also the real continuation of penalties, to try to ensure that whomever is in charge in Tehran, in the Islamic Republic, when this all ends is going to be incentivized to build a different future for the Iranian people.

It's possible. There are people within the system who, in the past, were sympathetic to at least some degree of reform. We are going to have to make that a top priority, not just an ancillary interest for the United States. If this conflict ends with the, essentially the same regime in power, but much weaker, then I think we're going to be, continue to be in a very dangerous position in the region.

O'HANLON: Do we know how to find those people and get to them? People that you wanna see us speaking with.

MALONEY: I think the, the greater question is who's really in charge when this all ends. We have some idea in terms of the, the temporary council that's been put in place. It's not very auspicious in terms of the personalities or the, the orientation of those people.

There are those who would point to the chairman of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Larijani. He's a long-time regime apparatchik. He is, for whatever reason, perceived as a potential pragmatist. I don't think we know, but I think that the key has to be that the United States has to prioritize meaningful change in Iran and meaningful opportunities for the Iranian people.

O'HANLON: Thank you. So, Phil, and then Mara and then Jeff. Feel free to address anything that's on the table where you wanna add something, but also my question, if there is a refinement adjustment or change in strategy that you'd recommend to the United States right now, what might it be? If I could go to you, please, Phil.

GORDON: Uh, yeah, a, a ton of good stuff to address. Starting with that, I mean, I guess I'd only fight the premise of the question a little bit in saying like, if I were advising, we wouldn't be starting from here because I think this entire operation, as we were discussing earlier, lacked a clear and achievable mission and is a massive gamble.

The most important part of the gamble is the one of, of trying to promote regime change, as colleagues had addressed. And as Suzanne was describing what could be a terrible outcome, which is to say having incited protesters and giving them hope that help would be on the way we could end up setting that goal aside, which seems to be en route and doing a deal with the remnants of the regime, Suzanne rightly described that as a terrible outcome. It might also be the most realistic and or, or best-achievable outcome available. So if you're like really pressing me to sort of say what we would do now, I would say we do need to look for a sort of, uh, off ramp.

We, we all talked about the range of missions from, you know, degrading their military forces, navy, ballistic missiles, proxies, all the way to nuclear to regime change. I think that first set of missions, while I also think there's a huge amount of risk involved, and we're seeing it already with the retaliation by Iran and certain things that Iran may not even done yet, those are, more or less achievable. I mean, arguably the nuclear program had already been significantly set back with Fordo and Natanz, so I'm not sure how much more we can set it back. I certainly wouldn't have justified this operation to do that. The biggest risk on Iran's nuclear program now is the 400 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium. But the problem is we don't really know where that is and can't really hit it. So I wouldn't justify the operation on that basis.

You can make incremental process, uh, progress on things like their ability to, to convert UF6 into uranium metal. So maybe that's something we can achieve through this. We can achieve a lot more on their ballistic missiles, and I think we are in launchers. But what I don't see us achieving, and again, colleagues have addressed this, is filling the political vacuum that we will create if we just continue to hammer this regime until it falls, which seems to be part of the objective.

That's related to the question, Mike, that you asked Jeff about assassinations. And on that I would say, you know, one reason that we have had a policy of not doing assassinations, and it's not just assassinations, but removing regimes and leaders, is not just because of the moral aspect or the niceties of international law, but because of the outcomes. And we don't have a, a long track record of assassinations, we do have a track record of removing governments. And invariably, while, as Jeff said, it feels good in the short term, it creates a political vacuum that nobody knows how to fill.

And I think that to me is the biggest problem with the Iran regime change plan. I don't know who will take over if we continue this military operation until the regime and the IRGC is genuinely smashed. And anything's possible, including, as you said at the top, Mike, maybe even a positive scenario, but that, that's the least likely because you have a bunch of people in Iran with guns. The opposition is deeply divided. It's not armed. You have a, a, a country of 90 million people that's fragmented along ideological lines, ethnic lines, political lines. The, problem with, you mentioned, I'll end with this, you mentioned I wrote a, a book about the history of our regime change efforts in the Middle East. And invariably it's the same story. The relatively easy part is actually getting rid of the regime. The much, much harder part is filling the vacuum that you inevitably create. And I think that's the great, the, the challenge that we've created for ourselves in Iran right now.

O'HANLON: Yeah. It's hard to say we've had too much success with that since the 1940s, but we'll see. And again, I recommend your book to anybody who wants more of this history of the specific focus on the broader Middle East, but--

GORDON: -- and 1940s, you're referring to Germany and Japan. I mean, that's kind of the exception. Sure, if we wanna invade and occupy those countries for 10 years and deploy a million soldiers, maybe we have a shot at that in, in Iran as well, but we're obviously not gonna do that.

Michael O'Hanlon: Yeah, and --

KARLIN: And not even even 10 years, right? Like we still have many, many thousands of troops in both of those countries.

O'HANLON: Yeah. Over to you, Mara. Please pick up wherever you'd like on that, or other questions about strategy going forward.

KARLIN: Absolutely. I mean, look, operationally a lot has been achieved both in this operation and over the last two years. But fundamentally, use of force is a tool in your toolkit of statecraft. And at the strategic level, I think you're hearing from all of us, Mike, really big questions about what is going to follow.

So, I guess the three recommendations I would offer: the first is exactly what Suzanne highlighted. I think we need to explain to the American public what's going on here. The administration owes it to the public. Americans are dying. If this continues, more Americans will die. We just need to understand what that's for.

And then two things I'd like answered at a more operational level, or that I would, that I would execute a more operational level. I would begin contracting a whole lot of commercial ships and getting them to the region. This is because you're not gonna be able to evacuate folks by air, given, obviously what's happening with the missile, and in particular the, the drone threat. So it's gonna have to be ships and they're not gonna be military ships. So I'd start contracting commercial ships.

And then the last thing I would do is I would call up the Ukrainians and I would make sure that we are learning everything we can from them about how to counter uncrewed autonomous systems. You know, the U.S. military, particularly based on attacks in Iraq and in Syria, developed some really solid training tactics and procedures for dealing with, with drone attacks. As I noted earlier, they appear to have some capabilities as well for pushing back on drone attacks. This is just so much bigger. You're really talking about almost every single piece of the region that is now feeling this impact. So what can we learn from Ukraine along these lines?

O'HANLON: Thank you. Let me ask, just maybe just to reinforce in my head, your second recommendation about hiring commercial shipping. What's the main purpose of that?

KARLIN: Yeah, you're not gonna be able to get U.S. military ships quickly to the region, nor will you want to do so because frankly, there's an opportunity cost. You want your military to actually be like winning and fighting wars. So commercial shipping can often be purchased pretty quickly to get somewhere to then be able to start evacuating Americans.

I mean, as, as Jeff can, can talk about, you know, we helped evacuate 15,000 Americans out of Lebanon in 2006. And that was incredibly difficult because we really couldn't use air power. And so we had to use commercial, commercial ships largely and, and, a bit on the military side. So if you've got a hundred thou, hundreds and thousands of Americans that are arrayed across the region who are all trying to get out of there and are of course looking at their government to try to execute this, your, your fastest option, not a great one though right now, is commercial ships.

O'HANLON: Jeff, over to you.

FELTMAN: I'm gonna pick, I'm gonna follow up on what Mara, on what Mara said, because it was, it was exactly what I was thinking of. It is a complete dereliction of duty for President Trump and his administration to have been planning this war for the past month, however long it's been since they've been moving assets, without planning for an evacuation of American citizens.

And I look back at the political theater that President Trump conducted just one week ago tonight at the State of the Union address where he said, and I quote, the first duty of the American government is to protect American citizens. And they have, they have shown no evidence that they put any planning in place when in 2000, you know, ancient history at this point, but in 2006, when Hezbollah dragged Lebanon into war with, with Israel, we had no

advanced notice. There was no planning. It happened on a July, on a beautiful July summer day when the, when the country had been relatively peaceful for, for Lebanon. So we had to scramble. Mara was back at the Pentagon. We had professionals in all these positions, Maura Harty was a legendary consular chief, head of the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the State Department, to put these things together. It was, we had to get, as Mara said, we had to, we had to hire commercial ships.

How do you hire commercial ships if you're a big bureaucracy? First you have to get fiscal data. You have to get money. You have to find the money, then you have to do the legal requirements. Then you have to figure out how to do insurance to bring commercial ships into a warzone. It's not an easy matter. And this was not, and this was one country. It was the largest non-combatant evacuation in American history at the time. But it was one country. We're talking about 14 countries now. And instead of the, to take the Lebanon example, instead of the embassy in Beirut trying to figure out how to reach American citizens, because what we were doing in the first days before we had the commercial ships, was to figure out how do you reach the American citizens that are all over Lebanon when Lebanon's at war, when the communications are down. Instead the embassy in Beirut has announced it's closed until further notice. I mean, it's a complete dereliction of duties. And it, and it undermines that Trump statement at the, at the State of the Union that the first duty is to protect American citizens.

You know, Biden rightly got criticized for the shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan. But we're talking now about the potential of, of American citizens being trapped in 14 different countries when they could have been planning all along for how they were going to deal with this. Right now, right now, the statements are, use commercial means to leave. Well, there are no commercial means to leave. There's been some hints they're looking at this, but they could have put all this in place.

So my recommendation is very much focused, as a former U.S. ambassador heading a U.S. embassy, where your responsibility is to protect U.S. citizens, get an evacuation plan in place now.

GORDON: Hey, Mike, can I just add, reinforce what Jeff said in a, in a couple of ways? I think it's absolutely essential. I mean, it is worth pointing out, reminding people, we don't currently have ambassadors, let alone professional experience ambassadors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Libya, Algeria, Iraq, and a number of the countries that we are asking American citizens to somehow get out of. It would be helpful if we did.

We also don't have a well-staffed national security staff or even a full-time U.S. national security advisor. I think Jeff and Mara and I have spent or spent hours and hours in the situation room planning and working with the entire U.S. government for situations just like this. Or, I would even argue, lesser situations where the risk to American citizens was not as great and you weren't asking so many to find means out of the country. That process doesn't seem to exist.

And then I think we're also paying a price for the DOGE cuts at the State Department, the DOGE cuts which forced a lot of people who actually have the types of experience that Jeff was just referring to who no longer work at the State Department. And so you, you got this really inexcusable situation where we launched this war with implications for hundreds of thousands of American citizens who live or are traveling in the Middle East and only days later start to thinking about asking them to find commercial ways out.

You saw the video from our ambassador to Israel basically saying. You know, people should leave, but we don't really have much to offer you. I hear there's some buses to go to Egypt, and maybe you can get out from there. If you're gonna do something like this, you really owe it to the American people to have planned this aspect of the operation as carefully as our military seems to have planned that aspect.

FELTMAN: Mike, I wanna jump back in with, with, one final comment. It's not a binary choice: Do you warn, do you keep military secrets or do you warn American citizens? President Trump has been talking about the possibility of war for several weeks, you know, that he would like to see diplomacy work, or diplomacy doesn't work, we may have no choice for war. That would've given the, the, that would've given the administration the opportunity without revealing its plans to start raising the level of concern about American citizens in the region. That, that you might wanna think about plans now. You know, that you, so it's, it the excuse that, well, we couldn't warn the American citizens because that would give the game away is simply not legitimate.

O'HANLON: Thank you all. Okay, we've got about 10 minutes to go and I have six audience questions. They come together in two groups. The first three are gonna be for Suzanne, 'cause they're about internal Iranian politics. And if others want to comment they may, but let me just get those on the table for Suzanne. And then I'll come back to the remaining three of you to divvy up, if you could the final three questions and then we'll wrap up at three o'clock.

So, Suzanne, here are the questions from the audience. First, in the absence of an organized opposition in Iran, what are the conditions needed for regime change to come about? Do you see any indications from the Trump administration they are working towards meaningful regime change and democracy building in Iran? So again, retreading some of the territory we've been over, but uh, feel free to summarize your thoughts there.

Second question: given the power vacuum divisions within the remaining regime leadership and popular unrest, how will this war affect internal divisions within Iranian society? So really sort of, one more variant.

And then finally, Trump's gamble is based on the ability and will of the Iranian people to rise up. At this point, how strong is the IRGC and its ability to crack down on another uprising? How organized is the Iranian opposition and would multiple factions compete for power? I think that last question's probably the one that is the most fresh relative to the conversation we've already had, but over to you.

MALONEY: Those are all great questions. And before I take them, I just wanna add one point to the conversation that my colleagues just had about sort of the preparations that went into this, this campaign. I think, you know, in addition to the failure to plan for the evacuations of Americans, you know, at least the president has said publicly that they didn't anticipate the Iranian retaliation against economic and energy infrastructure in the Gulf. That's ludicrous. There's literally no one who could have imagined an American-Israeli campaign in Iran that would take out senior leadership that wouldn't have provoked retaliation.

So, you know, we have now a quarter century of experience in war with the, with the failure to plan adequately for the aftermath of a major regime change war in another country in the

Middle East. It's just malpractice for the American president to suggest that we hadn't even contemplated the possibility of Iranian retaliation.

But I think that also gets to the, the questions that you put to me, which are all interconnected and very good. Yes, there will be a power vacuum. Yes, there will be divisions within the regime. I think, you know, whatever rump version of the Islamic Republic emerges from this conflict, it will be less secure, it will be more fraught with, with division.

And potentially, that will make it weaker, but it will also make it more dangerous both toward its own people and toward its neighbors because they'll just, you know, this is -- Iran in the, in the first several years of the revolution experienced a lot of internal turmoil, tribal revolts, attempted coups, military invasion from Saddam. It was a similar experience, although a little less fraught in the aftermath of the end of the war with Iraq, and then the death of the, the, founder of the revolution. Just a lot of skittishness and a lot of, um, frankly, problematic reactions from the, from a, a group of leaders who just weren't yet prepared to govern and, and very much worried about the circular firing squad that they were part of. So I think what we're likely to see is, you know, a weakened but potentially more dangerous version of this current system.

And what would it take for the Iranian people to rise up? Look, they've come to the streets again and again and again. What they don't have, because the regime makes it impossible to do this, is the kind of political mobilization that would sustain a protest movement even under pressure from a very coercive government. It just is, you know, the Islamic Republic was built by people who had come to power through a popular revolution. They have spent the past 47 years ensuring that they have the tools to repress that, but also that the people don't have the opportunities, don't have the mechanisms that would enable them to create a kind of structure that would really challenge the state.

The other major element that seems to be missing is a, a sort of, you know, charismatic leader who could really, both in terms of public engagement, but also in terms of managing an opposition movement, have the skillset to do that. It's, it's very rare, frankly, to find someone at the right moment in time who can actually lead a, a mass revolution against a well-armed government. And again, this is something that the Iranians have made sure that they dispatch either through, through force, through prison, or through exile, people who might in fact have those qualities.

So I think, you know, the reality is that without a concerted effort by whomever is dealing with this post-war government, Iran will revert to some version of the leadership that we've had over the course of the past 47 years. And that would be a real tragedy.

O'HANLON: Thank you very much. Okay, I've got the last three and the first one is probably for Mara, but then I'll let you three decide which of the three you'd want to each address. And starting with Mara, but the question that might be tailored for you: Do you see a potential scenario where the U.S. would consider sending ground forces? And what might the impact be both on the war and and over Iran, but also on global preparedness?

Second question: How have Iran's counter attacks on the Gulf countries affected U.S. calculus in deciding whether to continue or halt military options and operations? And then finally, are the United States and Israel in sync at this point with their goals? And how do we

know when those goals are met? So if I could begin with Mara and give each of you a last word, please.

KARLIN: Thanks so much. It is almost inconceivable that the U.S. will send in ground troops. Ground troops mean you're getting ready for a lot of casualties, especially given that you have the potential for a regime collapse. And as you've just heard from my colleagues, very big questions about what could fill the space. It's just, it's really, really hard to imagine President Trump wanting to do that or, or frankly, any of our last few presidents wanting to do that. You are purchasing that country at that stage, right? You are now owning it. You are trying to take it block by block. It's, it's going, it will be long and it will be ugly.

And, uh, look, I mean, Iraq 2026 actually looks pretty, pretty different. The cost to get to that from 2003 onward were so extraordinarily high. And I think it, it is safe to assume that if one were to use that analogy, you would see something as rough if not much, much worse. So, no, I'll be very skeptical.

O'HANLON: Thank you. Phil, to you and then Jeff to finish

GORDON: A brief word on each, on the Iranian attacks on Gulf countries. First, as Suzanne said, the president said the other day, the one thing he was surprised at so far was that. He shouldn't have been surprised. He, he should be angry. These attacks are despicable, condemnable, whatever you wanna say about them, but they're not surprising. 'cause you have a desperate regime whose only hope is to raise the costs. And right now the Gulf countries have a lot more to lose than Iran does because Iran has already been decimated, significantly weak economy and so on.

So, the effect. A lot of people have also said, this is counterproductive and Iran is going about it the wrong way. Again, you can condemn it, but, but the Gulf countries are, are unlikely to add much militarily to what the United States is already doing. So the risk that they drag them in, I think is limited. And again, Iran's only hope is to get to a point where those countries are pressing the United States. So I actually think that was entirely predictable and Iran is gonna keep doing that so long as, so long as it's able to.

On the U.S. and Israel, shorter answer: yes. You said, are they aligned? And you also said like, at this point? I think they're more than aligned at this point. This is Bibi's dream. He has dreamed of getting the United States, backed by the most powerful military in the world, to, at a minimum, decimate Iran's military, and at a maximum, get rid of the regime. So the United States and Israel, or at least as Israeli government, are absolutely aligned. Could that diverge? Possibly. But even if it ends in the sort of ugly way we referred to where you don't get regime change, but Iran's military is set back, that's still a dream from an Israeli point of view.

O'HANLON: Jeff.

FELTMAN: I don't have, I don't have much to much to add and our timer's out, except for that, that cost factor, that, that, that Iran wants to raise the cost to us. The cost, you know, the attacking of the Gulf. It's not just the Gulf, it's the, it's the raising of energy prices globally. You know, Iran's goal here is to get as to cause as much pain to as many countries as possible, to put pressure on the White House to back off. And the fact that Trump has

kept the goals vague, shifting, however you wanna describe it, we've been describing it, means he has an opportunity to decide when to declare victory.

O'HANLON: We'll stop there. I want to thank all of you for extremely cogent and incisive analysis, and thank everyone who's joined us today on following this important topic, thinking it through. Obviously one of the most important national security moments in the United States in recent years, for a period of time when the world's been going fast all the time for a long time. But this still has to rise, uh, near the top of the list, I think, for all of us. So on behalf of Brookings, thank you for joining us, and signing off.