

# The War Widens and Worsens

As the Secretary of Defense complains

DAN RATHER AND TEAM STEADY

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Credit: Getty Images

It would be easy to say the president grossly miscalculated the Iranians' ability to withstand war, but that assumes he calculated anything at all. This is a war executed on a whim, and Donald Trump could lose it.

The United States and Iran are playing an extraordinarily expensive game of chicken, and right now Iran is winning.

Trump may eventually retreat while claiming "victory," but the hardliners in Tehran remain in control. They will demand concessions from the

president before they stop attacks across the Middle East and allow ships to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, that narrow stretch of ocean that has a chokehold on the world economy.

While the White House doesn't seem to have a coherent plan to fight this war, or how to end it, Iran does: inflict economic, political, and military pain until Trump utters "uncle." They are doing a good job of it so far.

The Americans and Israelis continue to bomb Iran with no articulated endgame.

On Thursday, we awoke to images of two Iraqi tankers set ablaze by Iran in the Persian Gulf. For those of us who have watched and covered the region for years, it was a nightmare long feared, and it now means Iran and its radical clerics are calling the shots.

Don't think so?

As we near the two-week mark, Iran has shut down the oil industry in the Gulf, causing global economic panic. On Thursday, we heard from the new ayatollah, Mojtaba Khamenei, son of the slain leader, who conceded nothing. In a statement, he vowed to keep the Strait of Hormuz closed, through which 20 percent of the world's oil passes, as well as a host of petroleum-based products like plastics and fertilizer.

Iran is also reportedly mining the strait with explosives while successfully firing on U.S. warships and regional oil tankers. Seventeen U.S. military installations have been hit, as well as embassies in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai.

"Get ready for oil to be \$200 a barrel, because the oil price depends on regional security, which you have destabilized," Iran's military commander Ebrahim Zolfaqari said, ostensibly to Trump.

The International Energy Agency (IEA), a 32-country coalition including the United States, called this “the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market.” Even after the IEA agreed to release 400 million barrels of crude oil, prices continue to rise.

Analysts aren’t buying Trump’s assertion that prices will “drop very rapidly when this is over.”

Diane Swonk, Chief Economist for professional services firm, KPMG, told Bloomberg News that even if the war ends in a month, disruptions to the supply chain will take far longer to resolve. She described the situation as “similar in scope, not as bad, but similar to what we saw during the pandemic when everything shut down.”

While targeting the Gulf’s energy infrastructure, Iran is also engaging in cyber warfare. An Iranian hacker group took responsibility for a cyberattack on a medical tech company based in Michigan.

Trump is trying back-channel diplomacy, but two offers for a ceasefire from U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff have been rejected by Iran.

Iran’s current leadership remains intact and not at risk of imminent demise, according to Reuters. The Iranian military may have been severely damaged but has not been stopped by days of bombardment by the U.S. and Israeli militaries. None of this sounds like “winning.”

What about Trump’s plan? Pod Save America’s headline Thursday perfectly encapsulates his schizophrenic objectives: “Trump Says War Over, Vows to Keep Fighting.”

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Those diametrically opposed sentiments were again relayed during his rambling, hour-plus rally in Kentucky on Wednesday evening.

At one point he said, "We got to finish the job, right?" Minutes later he boasted, "Let me tell you, we've won ... In the first hour it was over." And yet, the U.S. military is still engaged in high-cost combat.

In the first seven days of the war, the Defense Department spent \$11.3 billion, according to *The New York Times*. And odds are they will be on the Hill asking for more in the coming weeks. This, despite getting a \$153 billion bonus from Trump's summer spending bill, on top of its \$900 billion annual budget, its biggest ever.

Trump is also losing the public relations war.

After he suggested Iran was responsible for the missile strike that killed a school full of Iranian children, a Pentagon report said no, the U.S. was at fault. With that knowledge, a reporter asked Trump if he now takes responsibility for the attack. Trump answered, "I don't know about it." Khamenei apparently does, and has vowed to avenge "the blood of the martyrs."

In a puzzling social media post on Thursday, Trump wrote, "The United States is the largest Oil Producer in the World, by far, so when oil prices go up, we make a lot of money." Who is the "we?" Yes, he and his billionaire buddies are making out like bandits, but most of the world will suffer mightily.

Here we are, nearly two weeks in, and what Americans know about this war comes down to this: It's costing 60 cents a gallon more to fill up the family car. Next week, it will likely cost even more.

And it's not just gasoline. Mortgage rates are climbing again. And investors are blaming the war for jittery markets.

Then there is the Pentagon, which like the rest of the Trump administration, is less than transparent and often thin-skinned.

On Wednesday, the Department of Defense had to revise its number of wounded from fewer than a dozen to at least 140, after Reuters reported 150 U.S. soldiers have been hurt, in addition to the seven who have been killed.

But perhaps most absurdly, the U.S. military command has banned photographers from Pentagon briefings after Pete Hegseth's staff thought photos of the secretary were "unflattering." At least we know where their priorities are. Three of the photos they don't approve of are above.

Whenever this unconstitutional, unpopular, and unnecessary war inevitably ends, Trump's domestic problems will be waiting for him. He will have to face a growing list of questions about the all-but-forgotten Epstein files. He will have to contend with rising prices while he rambles from speech to speech on his "affordability tour." And he will have to placate Republicans fighting for their political lives.

Meanwhile, we say a prayer for all American servicemembers in harm's way. We wish them a safe return.

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