

To what extent did Trump's Iran policy increase the risk of military escalation?

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Executive Summary

Trump's Iran policy significantly increased the risk of military escalation, culminating in the February 2026 Operation Epic Fury and a subsequent fragile ceasefire [1, 11, 14]. The withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, coupled with a "maximum pressure" campaign, removed constraints on Iran's nuclear program and heightened regional tensions, making miscalculation and accidental conflict significantly more likely [1, 3, 5, 11, 14].

Key Findings

Abandonment of the JCPOA and Nuclear Program Acceleration

The Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 eliminated verification mechanisms and directly led to an acceleration of Iran's nuclear enrichment activities and a shortening of its estimated breakout timeline [1, 3, 5, 24, 25, 23]. By early 2026, Iran's nuclear program was characterized by severely limited international verification access and unconfirmed transfers of highly enriched uranium [16]. Iran had stockpiled substantial amounts of enriched uranium, capable of being converted to weapons-grade material in a short timeframe [16]. Intelligence suggested Iran could produce enough weapons-grade uranium for nine nuclear weapons in three weeks [16], and by February 2026, its breakout time was approximately one week [5, 13]. This advancement, including the installation of numerous centrifuges and significantly expanded enrichment capacity, prompted the US and Israel to perceive an imminent threat, justifying the February 28, 2026 strikes intended to degrade Iran's nuclear infrastructure [1, 3, 6, 21].

Escalation of Tensions and Risk of Conflict

The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign and designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization significantly

escalated tensions with Iran, increasing the risk of miscalculation and accidental conflict [1, 11, 14]. Iranian officials frequently cited the IRGC designation, increased sanctions, and substantial US military deployments-including multiple aircraft carriers and a significant portion of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer fleet-as escalatory actions [7, 20]. These policies, following the JCPOA withdrawal, created a volatile environment where diplomatic avenues were reduced [1, 11, 14]. The US deployment of B-1 and B-2 bombers, along with MQ-9 Reaper drones, further heightened tensions, resulting in the loss of 26 Reapers by Iran [7]. The overall conflict is inherently escalatory, with Iran perceiving US actions as an existential threat [20].

Diplomatic Failures and Internal Divisions

Meaningful diplomatic engagement with Iran was likely never genuinely achievable between 2018 and 2026 due to fundamental, irreconcilable differences and escalating tensions [1, 2]. The Trump administration's pursuit of maximalist demands, beginning with the JCPOA withdrawal, substantially constrained realistic diplomatic pathways [1, 8, 16]. While renewed negotiations in 2025, mediated by Oman, showed initial promise with Iran presenting a 10-point plan, the US response was complicated by internal disagreement and shifting positions [2, 15]. Vice President Vance's dismissal of the publicly available version of the 10-point plan further undermined trust and stalled progress [13]. This internal division within the US administration, coupled with conflicting interpretations of the Iranian 10-point plan, significantly impeded the pursuit of a coherent diplomatic strategy [13]. The escalation to military strikes in February 2026 demonstrated the limited prospects for a purely diplomatic resolution [1, 13].

Domestic Political Motivations and Strategic Miscalculations

The abandonment of the JCPOA was significantly motivated by domestic political goals, thereby increasing the risk of miscalculation leading to conflict. President Trump initially claimed the goal of military action was "the total destruction of Iran," a claim widely considered unrealistic [20]. This suggests a disconnect between stated objectives and achievable outcomes, indicative of politically driven motivations. The decision to pursue military escalation, rather than prioritize de-escalation and diplomacy, resulted in a conflict with significant strategic risks, straining US military resources and potentially destabilizing the entire Middle East [11, 14, 17]. The assassination of Supreme Leader Khamenei, while intended to disrupt Iranian leadership, proved to be a critical

miscalculation, broadening the conflict and triggering widespread retaliation [1, 4, 6].

Integrated Regional Provocations and Nuclear Ambitions

Iran's pursuit of regional provocations and its nuclear ambitions were functionally integrated to establish a coercive regional posture [11]. Increased regional tensions, including attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, aimed to raise economic costs and pressure international actors toward resolutions favorable to Iran [11]. This strategy coincided with a shift in Iranian rhetoric toward openly considering nuclear weaponization as a deterrent [10, 12]. Prior to the military strikes, Iran expanded its nuclear enrichment capacity with numerous centrifuges [21], while simultaneously supporting proxy groups like Hezbollah and the Houthis [19], demonstrating a combined effort to project power and influence in the region. US policy significantly influenced the escalation of Iran's regional provocations by creating a security environment that amplified Iran's reliance on proxy groups and involvement in conflicts [37, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36].

Consequences of Military Escalation

The military strikes in February 2026, while causing significant damage to Iran's nuclear infrastructure, have not eliminated Iran's capacity for reconstitution [7, 11]. Despite the disruption, Iran retains a significant and readily reconstitutable capacity to advance its nuclear program, although a fully operational capability is likely years away [7, 11]. The reported death of Ayatollah Khamenei and the ensuing leadership uncertainty have likely contributed to a hardline shift in Iranian leadership, potentially solidifying a more aggressive nuclear posture [10, 11, 12, 21, 22]. The current ceasefire, brokered by Pakistan, demonstrates a recognition of the unsustainable costs of continued conflict, but does not resolve the underlying tensions [9]. The conflict has strained US military readiness, diverting resources from other critical regions like the Indo-Pacific [17, 18].

Implications

The findings suggest that the Trump administration's Iran policy, particularly the withdrawal from the JCPOA and the "maximum pressure" campaign, created a dangerous cycle of escalation that directly contributed to the current military conflict. For policymakers, this implies that unilateral withdrawal from international agreements without

viable alternatives can lead to unchecked proliferation and heightened security risks. The internal divisions within the US administration regarding diplomatic approaches also highlight the importance of a coherent and unified strategy when dealing with complex international adversaries. Furthermore, the integration of Iran's nuclear ambitions with its regional proxy activities suggests that a comprehensive approach addressing both aspects is necessary for any future de-escalation or resolution. The significant strain on US military resources and the potential for wider regional destabilization underscore the long-term costs of a confrontational strategy that forecloses diplomatic pathways.

Limitations and Caveats

This report draws from a range of sources, but specific quantitative assessments of the reduction in IAEA access post-2020, details of specific sites denied access, or the impact on verification efforts were not available in the provided research. Similarly, specific polling data or political events from 2018-2020 directly linking domestic political motivations for abandoning the JCPOA to escalating tensions were not detailed. Information regarding specific alternative diplomatic pathways considered by the Trump administration, who proposed them, or reasons for their rejection, including internal dissenting opinions, was also absent. The sincerity of Iran's 10-point plan remains a debated topic, with evidence suggesting it may be a strategic maneuver rather than a genuine attempt at immediate compromise [30, 31, 26, 27, 28, 29].

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