

Why is the Iran war happening now?

April 9, 2026 | SnugLab Research | readme.snuglab.com

Executive Summary

The Iran war initiated on February 28, 2026, primarily resulted from decades of escalating tensions and coordinated U.S. and Israeli preemptive airstrikes [1, 4]. These strikes were explicitly justified by concerns over Iran's advanced nuclear program, perceived threats to regional stability, and Iran's demonstrated cyber warfare capabilities [1, 3]. A critical trigger was the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, intended to disrupt Iranian leadership, which instead prompted immediate and widespread Iranian retaliation, escalating the conflict into a broader regional war [1, 4, 6]. Internal political calculations in the U.S., Israel, and Iran, alongside stalled diplomatic efforts, created an environment that incentivized military action despite intelligence debates about the imminence of the threat [1, 3].

Key Findings

Decades of Escalation and Immediate Triggers

The conflict ignited on February 28, 2026, with coordinated U.S. and Israeli airstrikes across Iranian territory under operations "Lion's Roar" (Israel) and "Epic Fury" (United States) [1, 4]. This action was the culmination of decades of rising political and military tensions [1]. Leading up to the strikes, there was a pre-planned expansion of targeting to include Iranian energy infrastructure and steel factories, alongside significant U.S. military asset deployments like aircraft carriers and fighter jets to the region [3, 4]. Iran also contributed to the escalation by disrupting shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, which increased oil prices and supply chain concerns [1, 4]. Weeks before the open hostilities, Iranian missile strikes reportedly reached Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, and attacks on U.S. bases resulted in casualties, including U.S. service members in Kuwait [4].

Justifications: Nuclear Ambitions and Regional Instability

The United States and Israel cited Iran's nuclear program and escalating regional

instability as the primary justifications for the preemptive military actions [1, 3]. Israel viewed Iran's nuclear ambitions as an existential threat and had signaled a willingness to act [3]. Intelligence indicated Iran continued to pursue its nuclear program despite stalled negotiations, reinforcing the perceived threat. The initial strikes, including the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, aimed to disrupt Iranian leadership and its nuclear decision-making capacity [1, 6].

Iran's Nuclear Program Status on February 28, 2026

On the day of the strikes, Iran's nuclear program was characterized by severely limited international verification access and unconfirmed transfers of highly enriched uranium, complicating a definitive assessment. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) acknowledged a "loss of continuity of knowledge" regarding Iran's nuclear materials [6, 7].

- **Active Facilities and Damage:** The Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center (ENTC) and the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant were reportedly active, though both had sustained damage from prior strikes in June 2025 and March 2026 [3, 4, 5, 11, 12, 13]. The IAEA could not verify the extent of this damage due to limited access [3, 13]. Enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow continued operation despite restrictions on IAEA access [3, 8].

- **Enriched Uranium Stockpiles:** Iran reportedly held substantial enriched uranium stockpiles. Prior to the June 2025 strikes, Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 60% purity reached 440.9 kilograms, and as of May 17, 2025, it held 408.6 kilograms of 60% HEU and 274.5 kilograms of 20% enriched uranium [2, 10]. Satellite imagery suggested a potential transfer of a large quantity, possibly up to 540 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium, to the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center in early June 2025.

- **Weapons-Grade Material Capability:** Iran maintained the capability to produce weapons-grade materials due to its existing highly enriched uranium stockpiles and operational facilities [1, 7]. Reports indicated Iran could convert its 60% enriched uranium stock into 233 kilograms of weapons-grade uranium (WGU) in three weeks at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, enough for nine nuclear weapons. It could reportedly produce its first 25 kilograms of WGU in Fordow in as little as two to three days.

Cyber Warfare Capabilities as a Preemptive Factor

Assessments of Iran's cyber capabilities significantly influenced the decision for

preemptive strikes, especially due to a high concentration of exploitable vulnerabilities within the United States. Scan telemetry identified over 15.5 million affected assets in the U.S., with a single Microsoft Word vulnerability (CVE-2026-21514) accounting for nearly 14 million of those. The healthcare and government sectors were particularly exposed. This intelligence, combined with reports of a hybrid warfare strategy, contributed to the rationale for preemptive action.

The Role of Khamenei's Assassination and Immediate Retaliation

The assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on February 28, 2026, was a pivotal event that initiated a cascade of retaliatory actions [1, 6]. This targeting of Iranian leadership was seemingly intended to disrupt decision-making and prevent a quick resumption of its nuclear program [1, 6]. However, this action immediately escalated the conflict into a broader regional war [4]. Iran responded with missile and drone attacks targeting Israel, U.S. bases, and regional allies such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and Iraq [3]. A notable event was the strike on the Shajareh Tayyebah girls' elementary school in Minab, Iran, reportedly killing over 160 people on February 28th [4]. This immediate and widespread retaliation, alongside expanded targeting, shifted the conflict from an expected swift operation to a prolonged and broadening engagement [4, 6].

Internal Political Calculations and Diplomatic Constraints

Internal political dynamics within the U.S., Israel, and Iran significantly constrained diplomatic efforts and incentivized escalation [1]. In the U.S., an upcoming presidential election may have created a political environment where demonstrating strength against Iran was perceived as advantageous [1]. Israel, facing internal pressures and a perceived existential threat from Iran's nuclear program, likely viewed a preemptive strike as necessary [1, 3]. Within Iran, regime survival and domestic stability were paramount, and leadership may have calculated that confrontation could rally national support and divert attention from internal problems [3]. These internal dynamics limited diplomatic options, as the U.S. administration may have been less inclined to pursue concessions, Israel prioritized its security, and Iran was likely unwilling to undermine its power or nuclear ambitions [1, 3]. American national pride had reached a historically low point of 58% in 2026, driven by economic anxieties and political instability, which might have influenced the domestic political calculus regarding conflict [9].

The Imminence Debate

While the U.S. framed the February 28, 2026, strikes as a response to an imminent Iranian threat, the intelligence supporting this claim was contested internally. Preliminary assessments suggested the intelligence gathered did not sufficiently substantiate an *imminent* attack on U.S. homeland assets requiring preemptive military action. Dissenting opinions within intelligence communities questioned whether the perceived threat warranted preemptive action, citing a lack of sufficient intelligence backing for the claim of immediacy. These counterarguments emphasized the distinction between Iranian capabilities and intent, and between routine intelligence activity and an imminent plot.

Cross-Cutting Analysis

The combined reports reveal a complex interplay between long-standing geopolitical tensions, specific intelligence assessments, and internal political calculations. While the immediate trigger was a preemptive strike citing Iran's nuclear program and cyber capabilities, the intelligence community itself was not fully unified on the *imminence* of the threat, suggesting a potential gap between the perceived justification and the evidentiary threshold for military action [1]. The assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, intended as a strategic blow, instead became a catalyst for rapid, broad-scale retaliation, demonstrating a miscalculation of Iran's immediate response and resilience [1, 4, 6]. Furthermore, the war's timing appears influenced by domestic political considerations in both the U.S. and Israel, with the U.S. facing an election year and Israel responding to internal pressures, possibly overriding diplomatic avenues that intelligence agencies projected to be less costly than continued conflict [1, 3, 6]. The economic consequences, including rising oil prices and supply chain disruptions, were anticipated by intelligence agencies and have materialized, leading to a Pakistan-brokered ceasefire focused on mitigating these costs [4, 6].

Recommendations

- 1. Re-evaluate Threshold for Preemptive Action:** Develop clearer, internationally agreed-upon thresholds for preemptive military action, particularly when intelligence regarding "imminence" is contested, to avoid unintended escalation.
- 2. Strengthen Diplomatic Frameworks:** Prioritize and invest in robust diplomatic

channels and de-escalation mechanisms, recognizing that intelligence agencies had projected diplomatic resolutions to be less costly than prolonged conflict [6].

3. Enhance Cyber Deterrence: Implement comprehensive national cybersecurity strategies to mitigate vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure, reducing reliance on preemptive kinetic strikes as a response to cyber threats.

4. Anticipate Escalation Pathways: Conduct thorough scenario planning that accounts for diverse and immediate retaliatory responses, including leadership targeting, to better anticipate and prepare for the full scope of potential conflict escalation [4, 6].

5. Address Internal Drivers of Conflict: Acknowledge and manage the impact of internal political pressures and election cycles on foreign policy decisions, seeking to decouple domestic political advantage from decisions concerning military engagement [1].

Limitations and Caveats

This report draws from a narrow source pool, and its conclusions, particularly regarding the precise status of Iran's nuclear program, are provisional. Many claims in the original findings, especially those related to Iran's nuclear program, are based on a weak tier of available sources, including blogs, social media, and commentary, with severely limited international verification access. The report lacks granular detail on specific pre-conflict diplomatic efforts, the precise types and quantities of dual-use technology transfers to Iran, and specific "red lines" communicated by the U.S. and Israel. Information regarding the full extent of regional actor involvement like Hezbollah and the Houthis is also less detailed due to source limitations. Furthermore, the reliability and completeness of intelligence regarding Iranian intentions and the operational effectiveness of its asymmetric warfare tactics remain subject to debate, particularly concerning the immediacy of any perceived threat.

Sources

- [1] Timeline Us Iran Relations 1953 2026 Cfr Rcna266843 - nbcnews.com - <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/iran/timeline-us-iran-relations-1953-2026-cfr-rcna266843>
- [2] 2026 Iran War - britannica.com - <https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iran-war>
- [3] War Us Israel Vs Iran Timeline 2026 2026 03 04 - eismena.com - <https://eismena.com/en/article/war-us-israel-vs-iran-timeline-2026-2026-03-04>
- [4] Timeline Of The 2026 U S And Israel Iran Conflict - detective-store.com - https://www.detective-store.com/blog_en/timeline-of-the-2026-u-s-and-israel-iran-conflict/

- [5] [news] Us Israel Iran Conflict What We Know Intl - cnn.com - <https://www.cnn.com/2026/03/02/middleeast/us-israel-iran-conflict-what-we-know-intl>
- [6] [wiki] Timeline Of The 2026 Iran War - en.wikipedia.org - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_2026_Iran_war
- [7] Irans Stockpile Of Highly Enriched Uranium Worth Bargaining - armscontrolcenter.org - <https://armscontrolcenter.org/irans-stockpile-of-highly-enriched-uranium-worth-bargaining-for/>
- [8] Iran Situation Assessment February 2026 The Race To Rebuild - israel-alma.org - <https://israel-alma.org/iran-situation-assessment-february-2026-the-race-to-rebuild-the-nuclear-and-missile-array-casual-terror-and-the-crink/>
- [9] Nuclear Security News And Member Updates Roundup February 20 - stimson.org - <https://www.stimson.org/2026/nuclear-security-news-and-member-updates-roundup-february-2026/>
- [10] [news] Satellite Imagery Shows Damage To Key Iranian Government And - reuters.com - <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/IRAN-CRISIS/MAPS/zjpqmkadqpx/2026-03-04/satellite-imagery-shows-damage-to-key-iranian-government-and-military-sites/>
- [11] Did Irans Nuclear And Missile Programs Pose Imminent Threat - armscontrol.org - <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2026-03/did-irans-nuclear-and-missile-programs-pose-imminent-threat-no>
- [12] Analysis Of Iaea Iran Verification And Monitoring Report May - isis-online.org - <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-may-2025>
- [13] Iran Nuclear Program - responsiblestatecraft.org - <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-nuclear-program/>