

After Epic Fury: Winning the War but Losing Iran?

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Key Points

- The trajectory of Iran’s internal stability and regional behavior after Operation Epic Fury would depend on how security institutions, governance structures, and economic systems adapt to the sudden disruption of the Islamic Republic’s leadership.
- The most critical variable would be the cohesion of Iran’s security architecture. Fragmentation within the security institutions could produce competing armed actors and prolonged internal conflict. Conversely, partial institutional continuity could provide a stabilizing framework during political transition.
- Three domains will determine whether the post-conflict outcomes will be favorable or unfavorable to U.S. interests and US CENTCOM:
 - **Security:** preventing fragmentation of armed institutions while integrating former moderate regime security personnel into a restructured national framework.
 - **Governance:** preserving administrative continuity while enabling political reform capable of generating legitimacy.
 - **Economic:** stabilizing the economy and restoring basic economic functionality to prevent social unrest.
- The U.S. will face a strategic dilemma. Excessive intervention risks delegitimizing any emerging Iranian political order. Insufficient engagement, however, could allow internal fragmentation or external interference by rival powers. In the post-Epic Fury period, achieving stability in Iran will require a carefully calibrated strategy that upholds institutional continuity, advances gradual reform, and fosters sustainable economic recovery.

1. Introduction

Iran 2026 is not Iraq 2003, nor Egypt 2011. Structural, institutional, and societal conditions differ in ways that will shape the trajectory of any post–Operation Epic Fury environment. Nearly five decades after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran retains a disciplined security architecture, an entrenched bureaucratic apparatus, and tightly woven communal networks. These characteristics sharply distinguish Iran from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq at the moment of its regime collapse in 2003, while also setting it apart from Egypt’s partially intact but politically contested state during the post-Mubarak transition, which maintained internal stability largely due to the support of the military institution.

Iran’s institutional features do not eliminate the risk of disorder. However, they suggest that fragmentation, should central authority weaken, would likely unfold more gradually and unevenly than the rapid state collapse observed in Iraq. Iran would retain residual administrative capacity and coercive structures capable of shaping the trajectory

of a political transition. At the same time, the country could experience crises of legitimacy and contested governance similar to those that followed the Egyptian uprising of 2011. The experience of Iraq remains the most instructive cautionary case. The rapid dismantling of state institutions, the dissolution of the Iraqi Army, and sweeping de-Ba'athification policies created institutional vacuums exploited by internal and external malign actors that fueled insurgency and empowered extremist organizations. Egypt's experience illustrates a different risk: preserving core state institutions without establishing an inclusive and credible political order can lead to prolonged instability and recurring protests, as exemplified by the 2013 revolution that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power. However, together, these cases demonstrate a central lesson: **the removal of a regime does not automatically produce political stability or legitimate governance.**

This paper examines Iran's potential post-Operation Epic Fury environment across three interdependent domains: **security, governance, and economic.** These domains represent the principal drivers of post-conflict stabilization and state resilience. Particular attention is paid to the cohesion of Iran's security institutions, the role of communal and regional networks in maintaining local order, and the uneven distribution of administrative capacity across Iran.

Stabilization in the aftermath of Operation Epic Fury will depend less on the scale of military success than on the ability to preserve essential governance functions before instability spreads. The durability of the Iranian state will hinge not only on coercive force but on the management of institutional continuity, political legitimacy, and economic recovery—factors that military operations alone cannot determine.

2. Context

Operation Epic Fury assumes a decisive military campaign designed to: Destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran's missiles, annihilate their Navy, ensure their terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the world, and ensure Iran can never obtain a nuclear weapon.

¹ The Israeli (Operation Lion's Roar) military operation involves precision strikes against nuclear infrastructure, command-and-control facilities, and key leadership targets.

Although the campaign may represent a coordinated military effort, the U.S. and Israel entered their operations with different strategic objectives and political narratives. These differing priorities may remain manageable during the military phase of operations but could become more pronounced in the post-conflict environment. Diverging narratives about the purpose and success of the operation could therefore shape post-Epic Fury policy debates, potentially creating friction between Washington and Jerusalem regarding the acceptable political future of Iran.

Even if militarily successful, the coordinated U.S.-Israeli operation may not eliminate the Iranian state. Iran possesses extensive bureaucratic institutions, a large, educated population, and multiple overlapping security organizations capable of maintaining order in the absence of central leadership. The country's experience managing sanctions, internal unrest, and regional conflict has also produced a system capable of adapting to crises.

If no collapse is forthcoming, the central question is how the Iranian state and society will reorganize afterward.

Historical precedent offers two cautionary cases. In Iraq, rapid institutional dismantling produced state collapse and insurgency. In Egypt, institutional continuity preserved order but failed to produce durable political legitimacy. Iran's trajectory is likely to fall somewhere between these two outcomes.

3. The Lessons Identified from Iraq 2003

The stabilization of Iran demands careful application of lessons learned from Iraq in 2003. Disbanding Iraq's armed forces after the invasion created a violent security vacuum that fueled insurgency. External interference, especially by Iran, further intensified that insurgency. This shows the risk of abrupt institutional collapse and suggests that in Iran, the IRGC should be reformed and integrated, not eradicated. Similarly, Iraq's sweeping de-Ba'athification produced administrative paralysis and eroded the legitimacy of the postwar order, whereas in Iran the technocratic bureaucracy should be preserved to sustain service delivery even as political authority is restructured. Finally, delayed reconstruction and economic stagnation in Iraq demonstrated that stabilization requires parallel progress on economic recovery and security. In sanctions-burdened but diversified Iran, synchronized measures for economic stabilization alongside security operations are indispensable to avert renewed instability and to consolidate any emergent political settlement.²

4. Security Domain

The immediate security environment following Operation Epic Fury would be shaped by the cohesion, or fragmentation, of Iran's existing security institutions.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The IRGC (190,000) remains the most influential security institution in Iran. Over four decades it has evolved into a hybrid military, political, and economic organization with deep influence across Iranian society.³ Following regime disruption, the IRGC would likely experience internal divisions. Pragmatic elements may prioritize institutional survival and seek accommodation with a transitional political authority. Hardline factions could instead mobilize resistance against both domestic reformers and external actors. The greatest danger would emerge if IRGC units fractured into autonomous regional forces. Such fragmentation could produce a militia environment similar to that which emerged in Iraq after 2003. Stabilization strategies should therefore focus on institutional restructuring rather than wholesale dissolution of the IRGC.

Basij Mobilization Networks

The Basij militia (600,000 on mobilization) represents a nationwide network embedded in communities, universities, and workplaces.⁴ Although often portrayed as an ideological force, it also functions as a social and political mobilization structure. Following regime disruption, Basij units could fragment into localized militias or political organizations. Programs that provide employment opportunities or integration into local policing structures could mitigate the risk of militia proliferation.

Artesh

The Artesh (400,000) functions as Iran's traditional national military, maintaining a primary focus on territorial integrity and conventional defense rather than ideological expansion.⁵ Unlike the IRGC, the Artesh draws its legitimacy from its identity as a professional, state-centric institution, often enjoying a higher level of public trust due to its perceived distance from political repression. In the event of regime disruption, the Artesh is the most likely candidate to act as a stabilizing force or a "guarantor of order," as its leadership typically prioritizes the survival of the Iranian state over specific clerical factions. If incentivized appropriately, the Artesh could counter the threat of more ideological elements like the IRGC and Basij. However, its long-standing rivalry with the IRGC for resources and influence could create friction during a transition. Security strategies should emphasize the professionalization and integration of the Artesh into a new national command structure, leveraging its existing bureaucratic framework to prevent a total security vacuum.

Iranian People

Iran's population is unlikely to rise up in a broad social movement leading to regime change. Social movement theory requires key conditions, like deep shared grievances over unfairness, real openings in the political system for action, a prominent “opposition leader,” solid organization and resources, and clear messages that unite people, for a sustained uprising to take hold.⁶ In Iran today, these elements are either missing or actively suppressed. The regime's security forces remain strong and intact enough to crush protests quickly, blocking any real political opportunities. Moreover, the external attacks by the U.S. and Israel can trigger nationalist feelings, where many Iranians view the strikes as foreign aggression against their country rather than liberation from their own leaders.

Peripheral Regions

Iran's peripheral regions may present challenges. Azeri (Azerbaijani) communities in the northwest, Kurdish populations in the west and northwest, Baloch groups in the southeast, Arab populations in Khuzestan in the southwest, and Lur communities in the Zagros Mountains maintain distinct political, cultural, economic, and environmental grievances. These regions could become focal points for either stabilization or fragmentation. Strong local leadership networks may maintain order. However, external actors, including neighboring regional states, could exploit local grievances to advance their strategic interests.

Regional Proxy Networks

Iran's regional proxy organizations (Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and the Houthis) would also reassess their strategies following regime disruption. Reduced financial support from Tehran could weaken some of these groups, but many possess independent operational capabilities that would allow them to persist.

5. Governance Domain

Political stabilization will depend on preserving administrative continuity while allowing space for political reform. Iran possesses a capable technocratic bureaucracy responsible for public services, energy infrastructure, and economic administration. Maintaining the functionality of these institutions will be critical for preventing widespread disorder.

Transitional Authority

The immediate priority following regime disruption would be the formation of a Transitional Council. This body would likely include technocratic administrators, representatives of major political factions, respected religious figures, security-sector representatives, and selected diaspora leaders, ensuring both administrative competence and political representation. Its mandate would be strictly temporary and focused on crisis management rather than permanent institutional redesign.

Institutional Continuity

Broad purges of officials associated with the Islamic Republic could produce administrative paralysis similar to that experienced in Iraq during de-Ba'athification. Retaining experienced technocrats and civil servants, except those implicated in major abuses, would help maintain governance capacity and prevent administrative paralysis during the early transition period.

Political Legitimacy

A transitional authority would likely adopt an interim constitutional or legal framework defining the scope of transitional governance. This framework would clarify the authority of provisional leadership, protect basic civil rights, and establish mechanisms for resolving political disputes. At the same time, the transition should emphasize broad political inclusion, incorporating reform-oriented networks, technocratic elites, regional representatives, minority communities, and elements of the diaspora opposition. The objective of this phase is elite stabilization through negotiated participation, reducing the risk that political competition evolves into fragmentation or violence while new institutional arrangements are developed.

6. Economic Domain

Economic recovery will play a decisive role in determining whether post-conflict Iran stabilizes or descends into prolonged instability.

Economic Conditions

Years of sanctions and economic mismanagement have weakened Iran's economy. Nevertheless, the country retains substantial industrial capacity, a highly educated workforce, and significant energy resources. Conditional sanctions relief could rapidly stimulate economic recovery if accompanied by credible political reforms.

Energy Infrastructure

Iran's oil and gas sector remains central to national economic stability. Restoring production capacity will require international investment and technological support. Transparent regulatory frameworks and international partnerships will be essential for attracting investment. Geopolitical actors (China and Russia) may see an opportunity to expand their influence through reconstruction investments, and Gulf states might participate, motivated by a desire to stabilize the region.

Structural Economic Reform

Iran's economy contains extensive quasi-state sectors linked to the IRGC and other political institutions. Gradual reform of these networks will be necessary to improve economic efficiency, but abrupt dismantling could trigger unemployment and social unrest.

Humanitarian Considerations

Conflict and economic disruption could generate humanitarian challenges including displacement, unemployment, and migration. International organizations and humanitarian agencies will play an important role in stabilizing social conditions.

7. Regional Implications

Iran's transition would have significant implications across the Middle East. A weakened Iran could reduce support for regional proxy networks, potentially lowering tensions in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. At the same time, competing regional powers, including Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, may attempt to shape

the outcome of Iran's internal transition. Russia and China may also seek to expand influence by supporting factions aligned with their strategic interests.

The danger of clusterization or balkanization of Iran (through ethnic fragmentation) must be avoided, as it would likely unleash protracted ethnic conflicts, create power vacuums ripe for militias and extremists, trigger humanitarian crises, invite predatory interventions by neighbors, and destabilize the entire region beyond the precedents of Iraq, Syria, or Libya.

8. Conclusion

Operation Epic Fury represents only the beginning of a potential transition within Iran, where military success alone will not determine the ultimate outcome. Instead, the interplay of Iran's security institutions, governance structures, and economic conditions will shape its trajectory. Iran's institutional depth and societal networks suggest that any major shift or collapse will unfold more slowly and unevenly than Iraq's rapid implosion, creating windows for stabilization even as they risk prolonged fragmentation.

If a major shift or collapse occurs, the U.S. must remain pragmatic, recognizing that reconstruction aid, financial packages, and large-scale economic programs cannot precede foundational political measures. Before committing resources or pursuing ambitious reforms, the U.S. should first secure broad pardons for cooperative elements of the former regime's personnel and security apparatus, thereby preserving administrative continuity, maintaining public legitimacy, and keeping the Iranian state intact as a single sovereign entity rather than allowing clusterization or balkanization that would invite chaos. This measured approach, engaging pragmatic local leadership networks, enabling gradual political reform alongside economic stabilization, and favoring diplomatic engagement and multilateral coordination over direct U.S. control, acknowledges that Iraq required more than two decades to achieve even modest stability.

Ultimately, the day after Operation Epic Fury will be defined not by military operations but by deliberate political, institutional, and economic strategies that prioritize stability while laying the groundwork for sustainable reform.

Pragmatic, Preserved (institutions), Pardons, and Patience.

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¹ The White House on X, “Operation Epic Fury,” <https://t.co/OxirjXAgGH> (accessed March 11, 2026).

² CVA Foundation, “The Iraq War Was a Blunder from the Start. Here’s Why,” <https://cvafoundation.org/was-the-iraq-war-a-mistake-consequences-of-the-iraq-war/> (accessed March 4, 2026); GIGA Focus Middle East, “Iraq 20 Years After the US Invasion: Challenges and Continuity,” https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/iraq-20-years-after-the-us-invasion-challenges-and-continuity?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed March 4, 2026).

³ CFR.org Editors, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 12, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/irans-revolutionary-guards> (accessed March 11, 2026).

⁴ “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards,” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

⁵ “Iran’s Revolutionary Guards,” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

⁶ Neil J Smelser, “Social Movement,” *Britannica*, February 6, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-movement> (accessed March 11, 2026).