

Six Days of War, 10 Rationales

TL;DR

The Trump administration has provided at least 10 shifting rationales for Operation Epic Fury in Iran over six days, including imminent threats, preventing nuclear weapons, regime change, and personal security. These justifications have evolved and contradicted each other, complicating a clear understanding of the war's objectives.

Key Takeaways

- The administration offered multiple, sometimes conflicting, reasons for the war, ranging from imminent threats and nuclear non-proliferation to regime change and personal security.
- Key rationales included eliminating imminent threats (No. 1), preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons (No. 2), halting militias (No. 3), regime change (No. 4), and preemptive strikes (No. 8).
- Statements from officials like Trump, Hegseth, and Rubio shifted over days, with rationales like world peace (No. 6) and Israeli pressure (No. 10) being introduced and then downplayed.
- The war has resulted in significant costs, including U.S. and Iranian casualties, regional turmoil, and an estimated \$1 billion daily expense, amid ongoing military advances.
- The lack of a consistent rationale has led to confusion, with the administration asserting clear objectives despite the evolving explanations.

The administration has laid out a buffet of reasons for Operation Epic Fury—take your pick.



Mark Peterson / Redux On the third day of the war in Iran, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [called](#) Operation Epic Fury the “most-precise aerial operation in history.” A difficult claim to fact-check. More difficult still has been parsing statements from the White House and the Pentagon to figure out, with any exactitude, why we are at war in the first place. So far, the Trump administration has offered at least 10 separate rationales in just six days.

Let’s start shortly after the first missiles launched early Saturday morning. In an eight-minute [address](#) posted soon after to his social-media platform, President Trump outlined a few explanations.

The reason for war, he said, is to eliminate “imminent threats” from the Iranian regime—threats that “directly endanger the United States, our troops, our bases overseas, and our allies throughout the world.” (Let’s call this Rationale No. 1: the imminent threat.) Also, he said, the objective is to ensure that the regime “can never have a nuclear weapon.” (Rationale No. 2: no nukes.) Also, he added, the objective is to “ensure that the region’s terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the region or the world.” (Rationale No. 3: halt the militias.) These goals are not incompatible, of course, and all involve degrading Iran’s ability to project force beyond its borders.

But just as he appeared to be wrapping up, Trump floated a major new reason: laying the groundwork for the Iranian people to “seize control of your destiny, and to unleash the prosperous and glorious future that is close within your reach.” In other words, “Take over your government.” (Rationale No. 4: regime change.) A couple of hours later, Trump said his attention was steadfastly on this last explanation—securing the liberty of the Iranian people from the country’s 47-year theocratic regime. “All I want is freedom for the people,” he told [The Washington Post](#) just after 4 a.m.

About half an hour later, another justification was evidently on the commander in chief's mind: "Iran tried to interfere in 2020, 2024 elections to stop Trump, and now faces renewed war with United States," he [wrote](#) on Truth Social. The post included a link to a story in a right-wing media outlet purporting to show Iranian election interference. (That seemed enough to constitute Rationale No. 5: election interference, before the sun had even risen over Mar-a-Lago.)

Later on Saturday, Trump revisited his second and third rationales for the strikes in an interview with [Axios](#). He cited the failure of negotiations (led by his son-in-law Jared Kushner and the real-estate developer turned Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff) to reach a deal to end Iran's nuclear ambitions. And he also spoke about his realization, while writing his speech the day before the bombing started, that Iran had a history of violence in the region: "I saw that every month they did something bad, blew something up or killed someone."

By Saturday afternoon, though, the president was ready to unveil his most ambitious rationale yet. As reports filtered in about the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Trump [took to social media](#) again to declare that the operation would continue "as long as necessary to achieve our objective of PEACE THROUGHOUT THE MIDDLE EAST AND, INDEED, THE WORLD!" (Rationale No. 6: world peace, an appropriately grand finale for launch day.)

On Sunday morning, Trump was back to Rationale No. 2, preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons—with little time to spare, apparently. "If we didn't do that, they would have had a nuclear weapon within two weeks," the president [told](#) Fox News, citing a time frame he had not included in his initial remarks. The same morning, the president [told](#) NBC News that the reason for the launch was simple: "They weren't willing to say they will not have a nuclear weapon."

(For context: The White House had [announced](#) last June that Iranian nuclear facilities had been obliterated and "suggestions otherwise are fake news." An analysis of satellite images by *The New York Times* last month [showed](#) repairs at key missile sites began shortly after those attacks last summer, but that work at nuclear facilities had been slower and more limited. And the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency [said](#) Monday that, although Iran has the ambition to possess nuclear weapons, it does not have a "structured program" to build them.)

As for supporting the Iranian people's freedom and pushing for regime change (Rationale No. 4), Trump on Sunday seemed to rhetorically retreat. "What we did in Venezuela, I think, is the perfect, the perfect scenario," he [told](#) *The New York Times*, referencing the middle-of-the-night capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January and the administration's willingness since then to work with Maduro's second-in-command, Delcy Rodríguez. Asked whether the U.S. would defend Iranians if they sought to overthrow the current regime (as Trump had encouraged them to do the day before), he said, "I don't make a commitment one way or the other." And the same morning, he [told](#) our colleague Michael Scherer that he had agreed to talk to Iranian leaders after they failed to agree to a deal. "They should've done it sooner," Trump said. "They played too cute."

Shortly after, a prerecorded [announcement](#) appeared on Truth Social in which the president

emphasized that “combat operations” will be ongoing “until all of our objectives are achieved.” The explanation built on the global-peace idea of Rationale 6 with a look to the future: “We’re undertaking this massive operation not merely to ensure security of our own time and place, but for our children, and their children, just as our ancestors have done for us many, many years ago,” the president said. (Rationale No. 7: for the grandkids.)

That seemed like the kind of rousing, big-picture finish on which the president might have ended day two of combat operations. But he wasn’t done. In an [interview](#) that night with ABC News, Trump hinted at another reason—self-preservation. “I got him before he got me,” he said, presumably a reference to Khamenei. The Justice Department has brought [charges in](#) two cases of alleged Iranian murder-for-hire plots, and a man allegedly backed by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is now on [trial](#) in New York, accused of a scheme to assassinate Trump. “I got him first,” the president said. (Rationale No. 8: preemptive hit.)

As the new week began, another rationale was percolating lower down the chain of command. At a Monday briefing, a combat-unit commander told officers that the war is part of God’s plan and that Trump was “anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth,” according to a complaint by a noncommissioned officer [circulated](#) by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, an advocacy group. (Rationale No. 9: fulfill God’s purpose.)

Elsewhere on Monday, ending Iran’s nuclear ambitions (Rationale No. 2) initially took center stage. “Crazy regimes like Iran hell-bent on prophetic Islamist delusions cannot have nuclear weapons,” Hegseth [said](#) at a briefing. Vice President Vance, in an [interview](#) with Fox News, said Trump authorized the strikes because he knew that Iran was “committed to getting on the brink of a nuclear weapon”—a notable distinction, perhaps, from actually being on that brink, or two weeks away (as the president had said).

[Read: Pete Hegseth is the Pentagon’s holy warrior](#)

But there was more. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, searching for an imminent threat that would have justified bypassing congressional approval, [implied](#) that Israel had forced the Pentagon’s hand because assessments showed that “if we waited for them to hit us first after they were attacked—and by someone else, Israel attacked them, they hit us first, and we waited for them to hit us—we would suffer more casualties.” House Speaker Mike Johnson said more or less the same: “Because Israel was determined to act with or without the U.S.,” the administration had a “very difficult decision” to make (Rationale No. 10: The Israelis made me do it).

That one, however, lasted barely a day. Trump, on Tuesday, [said](#) the opposite: “If anything, I might have forced Israel’s hand.” Rubio dutifully [walked back](#) his own remarks, insisting that the decision had been made separate from and prior to Israel’s. “The president systemically—made a decision to systematically destroy this terroristic capability,” Rubio said. “I was very clear in that answer.” (Rationale No. 3, it seems.) Rubio also added to some of his other previous remarks. He had warned on Monday of the “unacceptable risk” of an “entire regime” run by “radical clerics” making decisions on the basis of theology (Rationale No. 4). On Tuesday, he insisted that “our

objectives remain, as they've been identified from the beginning." Namely: "Iran can never have a nuclear weapon." (Back to No. 2.) The priority of regime change had, apparently, been sublimated.

Wednesday brought us full circle: Trump ordered the strikes because he felt (yes, felt) that Iran might attack the U.S., a.k.a. the imminent threat, Rationale No. 1.

"The president had a feeling, again, based on fact, that Iran was going to strike the United States, was going to strike our assets in the region, and he made a determination to launch," White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt [said](#). (Pentagon officials said in a closed-door congressional briefing on Sunday that there is no sign that Iran was planning to attack the United States first, Reuters [reported](#).)

Hegseth, meanwhile, included in his Wednesday briefing—among many other objectives—a reference to Rationale No. 8, assassinating the Iranian leaders alleged to have threatened the president's life. (This, by the way, is connected to Rationale No. 5 on election interference.) "We've known for a long time that Iran had intentions on trying to kill President Trump and/or other U.S. officials," he [said](#). "And while that was not the focus of the effort by any stretch of the imagination, in fact, never raised by the president or anybody else, um, I ensured, and others ensured that those who were responsible for that were eventually part of the target list."

Speaking at a roundtable with tech-industry leaders the same day, the president returned to Rationale No. 2, on nukes: "If we didn't hit within two weeks, they would have had a nuclear weapon," he [said](#), repeating a claim for which neither the Pentagon nor the intelligence community has provided any evidence. He added a dash of change-of-government thinking (Rationale No. 4) but with the Caracas model in mind, rather than the toppling of the Iranian regime. "Venezuela worked out really great," he said. "We have a wonderful relationship with the president."

Those most interested in a more robust Rationale No. 4—actual regime change—needed to wait less than 24 hours. Yesterday morning, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that, in calls with Kurdish minority leaders in Iran and Iraq, the president offered "extensive U.S. aircover" and other backing for Kurdish forces to take over parts of western Iran. But that needs to be considered alongside what Trump [told](#) *Axios* the same day: that he must be involved in the selection of Iran's next leader, modeling that process on his experience with Venezuela. "I have to be involved in the appointment, like with Delcy in Venezuela," he said. Later Thursday, the White House went back to relying on Rationale No. 8, posting a clip on X showing Trump [saying](#), "I was the hunted, and now I'm the hunter."

[Read: The glaring oversight in the U.S. war plan](#)

Military gains may ultimately outpace the administration's attempts to settle on a single reason for the war. U.S. and Israeli forces report swift advances in seizing local air superiority, degrading Iran's defensive capabilities, and killing senior Iranian figures. But the war already has come at the cost of six U.S. service members' lives along with (by early estimates) those of more than 1,000 Iranians, and it has produced turmoil in the region and in global markets. A

congressional official [told](#) our colleague Nancy A. Youssef that the Pentagon's preliminary estimates say the war is costing taxpayers \$1 billion a day.

If you can't figure out why we are at war, maybe (according to the administration) the problem is your own inability to understand. Hegseth [said](#) Monday that the administration was "very clear-eyed" and would avoid "the foolish policies of the past" that lacked goals "tethered to actual, clear objectives."

On Wednesday, the White House [on X](#) said much the same: "Our objectives are clear. We will not stop until they are achieved."

Friday, March 6, 2026