



Written by [Paul Dragu](#) on March 23, 2026

Operation Epic Confusion: Mixed Signals and Stalled Victory in Iran

Early Monday morning, President Donald Trump announced on Truth Social that the United States had been talking with Iran for two days about ending the war. But soon after, the Iranians denied that such talks ever happened. This conflicting narrative is part of a pattern that began the moment America and Israel launched the war against Iran on February 28.

Trump [said](#) on Truth Social, in all caps, that the “constructive conversations” between the two nations are the reason he asked the “DEPARTMENT OF WAR TO POSTPONE ANY AND ALL MILITARY STRIKES AGAINST IRANIAN POWER PLANTS AND ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE.” Iran’s Foreign Ministry responded by completely contradicting Trump’s announcement, saying there has been “no dialogue” between Tehran and America. They added that other countries have tried to mediate between the two. “Yes, there are initiatives from regional countries to reduce tensions, and our response to all of them is clear: we are not the party that started this war, and all these requests should be referred to Washington,” they said, [according](#) to reports.



AP Images

The Iranians have reason to lie about these talks, but this is just another reminder of the cloud of confusion that has hovered over this war since the beginning.

No One to Talk To?

For instance, just last week, on Friday, Trump said there was no one to talk to in Iran. He told reporters there would be no ceasefire because “their leaders are all gone,” referring to America and Israel’s killing of many Iranian leaders. But the president’s comment didn’t really make sense.

First off, reports emerged early in this war that a new supreme leader, the son of the former, had been appointed. Also, a recent analysis from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) said the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has “expanded its influence over regime decision-making.” And while many Iranian leaders have indeed been killed, someone is obviously making leadership-style decisions within Iran. How else are they coordinating a campaign to keep the Strait of Hormuz



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shuttered? Who is giving orders for continuous missile strikes on Israel and other parts of the Arab world? And who have U.S. officials been talking to over the weekend if there is no one to talk to?

The Fight Is Over?

Speaking of missiles, on March 9, Trump announced that the war was winding down and that Iran's fighting capabilities were all but wiped out. He painted a picture of an Iran with little ability left to put up a fight. He said their missile and drone capabilities were between 80 percent and 90 percent decimated. But more than two weeks later, missiles and drones continue flying out of Iran. On Friday, the country launched eight missile barrages at Israel, injuring at least 47 people. Iran has also been hitting Israel with cluster bombs, which are far more difficult to defend due to their dispersed nature. If a cluster bomb is not intercepted early on, it breaks apart into many little bomblets. At that point, neutralizing it becomes impossible.

Gulf countries also spent the weekend batting down Iranian missiles and drones. [According](#) to the ISW:

The Saudi Defense Ministry said that Saudi Arabia intercepted 68 drones from 3:00 PM ET on March 20 to 3:00 PM ET on March 21. The Emirati Defense Ministry said on March 21 that it intercepted three ballistic missiles and eight drones. Kuwait's Defense Ministry said on March 21 that Kuwait had intercepted nine ballistic missiles and four drones in the past 24 hours. Bahrain intercepted two ballistic missiles between 3:00 PM ET on March 20 and 3:00 PM ET on March 21.

And Iran-backed proxies and militias are causing havoc, too. "Hezbollah claimed 45 attacks targeting Israeli forces and positions in northern Israel and southern Lebanon, as well as northern Israeli towns, between 3:00 PM ET on March 20 and 3:00 PM ET on March 21."

Plus, Iran-backed militias hit American forces in Iraq. "Iranian-backed Iraqi militia front group Saraya Awliya al Dam claimed on March 20 that it conducted six 'qualitative operations' against US bases in Iraq," continued the ISW.

Yes, the United States and Israel have greatly reduced Iran's capabilities, but the picture the president painted two weeks ago (and that he has painted multiple times since) that Iran had been defanged and all but defeated was obviously inaccurate. A defeated enemy does not cause the kind of trouble Iran did just in the last few days. And a beaten enemy doesn't pose the threat Iran does toward the world's economy.

The Strait of Hormuz

Perhaps the best proof of Iran's continuing ability to resist is the Strait of Hormuz, which remains effectively shut down. The threat of getting hit by Iranian missiles has caused oil tankers and commercial ships to stop traveling through the strait. This has sent oil prices soaring — and the price of consumer gasoline with it. The situation is causing massive political problems for Trump at home, where his administration is scrambling for ideas on how to ease gas prices and the accompanying market tensions. The strait's closure is also adding to the animosity directed at Trump and the United States from around the world, especially Europe and Asia, whose energy supplies are most affected. Experts have predicted that if the strait continues to remain untraversable, it will cause a global recession.



Regime Change — Whose Idea?

Then there is the issue of regime change. Protests erupted within Iran in December, and carried on into mid-January before they stopped. The White House painted a picture of a people who desperately wanted new leadership. In his February 28 speech announcing the war, Trump encouraged the Iranian people to rise up and take control of their government. But nearly a month into this war, a month after its leadership class has been beheaded, a month into constant bombardment, there's no sign whatsoever of an impending popular uprising. Trump has even made comments suggesting he had given up on the idea. Some reports said the CIA was talking with Iranian Kurdish militias as part of a plan to send them in there to trigger a revolt.

If the desire for regime change within Iran is as strong as the White House and Western media have led us to believe, why haven't the people taken advantage of a government that's literally under fire and off-balance? Could it be that Western media exaggerated the size of the protests? Could it be that reports saying the protests were instigated by the CIA and Israel's Mossad were true? Could it be that pro-Iranian "propaganda" saying the Iranian people are more opposed to being under American rule than mullah rule is true?

It's hard to tell why the people aren't rising up, but it's clear from comments by Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that they believed a popular uprising was possible.

Conflicting Messages

From the moment this war kicked off, the Trump administration has been inconsistent in its messaging. In his February 28 video message, the president said Iran posed an imminent threat and it needed to be dealt with. That was the reason for the war. But a few days later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [told reporters](#) the United States went to war because Israel was going to attack either way, and that left America no choice but to preemptively defend against retaliation. House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) has more or less corroborated this. Those are two different reasons.

This war has obviously morphed into more trouble than the president hoped for, more than he likely anticipated. His forays into Venezuela early this year and Iran last year were quick and painless. Maybe that gave him misguided confidence that this, too, would be easy. Instead, the warnings of some of his advisors, as well as those of noninterventionist analysts and commentariats, have proven correct. Adding to the confusion and unpredictability is America's partner in this war, as it's become clear that Israel and Washington aren't always on the same page. A recent example is Israel's strike on Iran's South Pars gas facilities, which Trump publicly denounced.

For years, the president has communicated every day, at all hours of the day it seems, through social media. Perhaps the mixed signals emanating from the White House are the manifestations of an impulsive and sometimes confused president trying to figure out in real time how to deal with this war. Whether he's trying to calm the markets, restore trust in his plan, or shame European allies into helping out, maybe what we're seeing is the "leader of the world" feeling his way around his first major war.



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