

What happens next in the Middle East?

The past two weeks have engulfed the Middle East in airstrikes and missile and drone attacks between Israel and Iran, culminating in US strikes on Iran's nuclear installations and Tehran's retaliatory missile attack on the Al Udeid US Air Base in Qatar. This has marked a significant escalation in a region plagued by multiple wars and conflicts over the past 18 months, including: the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, the Israel-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon, the overthrow of Syria's government amidst a civil war, and the Red Sea crisis, to name a few.

On 24 June 2025, US President Donald Trump announced a ceasefire between Israel and Iran. It remains to be seen how solid this cessation is, but if it holds, the major question is what happens next in the Middle East.

Iran's main nuclear sites are likely to have been damaged. However, the extent of damage is hard to assess without independent inspections on the ground. It is unclear what is left of Iran's nuclear programme or its stock of highly enriched uranium, but it is doubtful that it has been completely eliminated. The potential for Iran to rebuild and advance its nuclear programme presents an important risk for the coming years, especially if Tehran's rulers conclude that only by possessing nuclear weapons can they deter future attacks by Israel and the US.

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A negotiated agreement to limit Iran's nuclear programme would be the best chance to prevent future escalations. Such an agreement should involve a system of IAEA verifications and inspections to ensure monitoring and compliance.

A "JCPOA 2.0" would be a difficult and lengthy process. Trust between the parties is even lower since Israeli and US strikes took place as negotiations were ongoing to reach a nuclear deal. The US position that Iran must cease all uranium enrichment will continue to be very difficult for Tehran to swallow. The E3 (UK, France and Germany) and the EU can play an important role here, as they did in the process that led to the JCPOA in 2015. Even though Washington ignored them in launching its strikes, they can act as a diplomatic bridge between Iran and the US, working to re-establish trust and mend the current positions.

While the Israel-Iran conflict has taken centre stage for now, the war in Gaza continues unabated. Without a solid ceasefire and a long-term plan for reconstruction and governance of Gaza, there will be no stable Middle East. As the confrontation between Israel and Iran comes to a halt, the West must turn its attention back to Gaza and potential pathways to a long-term peace.