



Armed Conflict



19

FEB

14:59 UTC

MENA SITUATION UPDATE: US force buildup comes to fruition, reflecting Washington's growing proclivity toward military action against Iran; continue to prepare for escalation scenarios

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Executive Summary:

- Over the past 24 hours, reports have surged that the US may be considering military action against Iran in the immediate-to-short term. These carry greater weight as they are unfolding alongside the full fruition of the US military buildup in the Middle East.
- While President Trump reportedly issued Iran a two-week deadline to bridge the gaps, emerging developments indicate that this timeframe could be shortened based on the assessment that Iran is fundamentally unwilling to meet US demands, in addition to sufficient US forces in the region to launch a campaign, and disadvantages of delaying such action.
- This environment also increases the risk of miscalculation, where mutual concerns of preemptive action could also trigger a broader confrontation. **An escalation therefore cannot be ruled out in the coming days.**

Current Situation:

Force build-up and operational preparations

- According to an unconfirmed February 18 report, US President Donald Trump is moving closer to launching a major military campaign against Iran, which would be a “massive, weeks-long operation” amounting more to a “full-fledged war” than a “pinpointed operation.”
- The report indicated that this would be a joint US-Israeli campaign, significantly broader in scope than the 12-day war in June 2025.
- Israeli officials cited in the report suggest a war could materialize within days, while US sources indicate that Washington might need more time.
- A separate unconfirmed report from February 18, citing a US official, stated that US military forces deployed in the Middle East should be in place by mid-March.
- A report from February 18 citing Pentagon officials stated that the accelerated deployment of US forces to the Middle East has positioned President Donald Trump in a place where he can initiate military action against Iran as early as this weekend. However, President Trump has reportedly not yet made a final decision on whether to authorize the attacks.
- An unconfirmed February 19 report suggested that the US will not wait for the arrival of the second US aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, to the region prior to initiating any military action.
- According to a February 18 report, the current US military deployment in the Middle East is the largest since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The report also states that the US is ready to strike Iran but is waiting for President Trump’s directions.
- US national security informed President Trump that the US military is ready to attack Iran as early as February 21, although President Trump has not yet made a final decision, according to an unconfirmed February 18 report. It added that the timeline for military action is likely to extend beyond this weekend.
- According to unconfirmed reports on February 18 citing ship tracking data, the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier has reached the Strait of Gibraltar, with an expected arrival in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in four days. A separate February 18 report stated that the carrier is likely to be initially deployed near the coast of Israel to defend Israeli towns and cities.

Developments related to US-Iran talks

- On February 18, US White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Iran would be “very wise” to make a deal with the US and that Trump is still hoping for a diplomatic agreement with Iran over its nuclear program.
- According to an unconfirmed February 18 report citing US officials, Iran is expected to present a written proposal to Washington on February 24 on how to solve the outstanding differences following the second round of US-Iran talks in Geneva on February 17.

Other Developments

- On February 18, the US Department of State announced visa restrictions on 18 Iranian government officials, industry leaders from the telecommunication sector, and their immediate family members for their perceived complicity in human rights violations, particularly inhibiting Iranians’ freedom of expression, during protests.
- On February 19, Poland’s Prime Minister Donald Tusk reportedly urged Polish citizens to leave Iran immediately, adding that “in a few hours, there may be no more possibility to evacuate.”
- According to February 18 reports citing multiple satellite imagery, Iran has built a “concrete shield” over a new, unknown facility at a sensitive military site and covered it with soil. The area was reportedly struck by Israel during the 12-day war in June 2025.

Assessments & Forecast:

US force buildup comes to fruition, reflecting Washington's growing proclivity toward military action against Iran, which could materialize in short term

1. Over the past 24 hours, reports have surged that the US may be considering military action against Iran in the immediate-to-short term, possibly within days. This follows increasing indications that Iran is unwilling to meet US demands, as underscored by Vice President JD Vance on [February 18](#). In turn, this has likely strengthened the assessment within the US administration that diplomatic progress remains too limited and slow, leading to more serious consideration of a military campaign.
2. The growing reports of potentially imminent military action are carrying more weight as they are unfolding alongside the full fruition of the US military buildup in the Middle East, representing the largest recorded in the region since the US campaign in Iraq in 2003. These deployments, which began in January with the deployment of USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group, have intensified in recent days with the arrival of advanced fighter aircraft. This has included dozens of F-22s, F-35s, F-15s, and F-16s, with 50 aircraft reportedly arriving to the region within a 24-hour period ahead of the second round of the US-Iran talks in Geneva on February 18. The scale and structure of this force posture is unprecedented in recent years and suggests groundworks for a more significant campaign against Iran should President Trump authorize such action.
3. In terms of timeframes, President Trump reportedly issued Iran a two-week deadline to submit further proposals. However, two emerging developments suggest that this timescale could be shortened. While unconfirmed, the report suggesting that the US administration is not waiting for the arrival of the USS Gerald R. Ford before making a decision on military action is plausible. This would be based on the assessment that Washington has already amassed sufficient forces to initiate and sustain its campaign, at least in the initial stages. In this context, the USS Gerald R. Ford's deployment near Israel instead, would suggest final preparations to bolster the defense of its ally in anticipation of retaliation against the country. This would also shorten the timeframe for the USS Gerald R. Ford's arrival to its expected arena of operations and its operational readiness, in comparison to any deployment in waterways closer to Iran which would take the aircraft carrier longer to reach.
4. Secondly, the alleged February 24 deadline for Iran to submit a written proposal on how it will bridge the remaining gaps, would suggest reluctance from Washington to wait a further two weeks to exhaust the diplomatic route. This is plausible given that a protraction of talks would allow Iran to prepare offensively and defensively for an armed escalation. At the same time, prolonged negotiations could reduce the element of surprise that would likely be critical for any US/Israeli military campaign to neutralize Iran's offensive capabilities early and thus reduce Tehran's retaliatory power.
5. **FORECAST:** Therefore, although a two-week deadline has been stated publicly, if Washington assesses that diplomacy is not producing meaningful progress, that timeframe could shorten quickly and lead to military action. Concurrently, reported Israeli preparations for conflict further underscore prevailing assessments that diplomacy is unlikely to produce a durable agreement, indicating that regional actors are increasingly planning for an escalation scenario. Further contingency planning measures may therefore materialize over the coming days, such as the withdrawal of diplomatic personnel or emergency preparedness drills in countries that are liable to be affected in the region.
6. **FORECAST:** An escalation therefore cannot be ruled out in the coming days. While it remains unclear whether President Trump assesses that the diplomatic path has been exhausted, multiple indications suggest a growing proclivity toward military action. This environment also increases the risk of miscalculation, where mutual concerns of preemptive action could also trigger an escalation into a broader confrontation.

Recommendations:

MENA:

1. Update and implement business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols across the MENA region to ensure business continuity in escalation scenarios. Conduct arena-specific risk assessments, incorporating the risks involving the potential eruption of regional hostilities.
2. Reconsider nonessential travel to **Gulf states** at this juncture.
3. Reconsider travel to states that may be particularly adversely impacted in a scenario of regional armed conflict, including **Lebanon** and **Jordan**.
4. Avoid all travel to **Iraq** at the current juncture.
5. Avoid travel to military installations in the region, especially those hosting US personnel. Adhere to authorities' updates and advisories.
6. Remain cognizant of and take precautions against the potential resumption of Houthi maritime attacks in the Red Sea, as well as extensive GPS/GNSS disruptions in the Arabian/Persian Gulf, should armed conflict break out in the region.
7. **MAX Security has strong on-the-ground capabilities across several arenas in MENA, including secure transportation, the provision of safe havens, and contingency consultation and planning. Contact us at operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434.**

Iran:

1. Avoid all travel to Iran at the current juncture, given the economic and political crises, the risk of arbitrary detention, and prospects for a US military escalation against the country.
2. Foreign nationals operating in Iran are advised to leave the country at this time due to the above-mentioned risks.
3. Avoid all travel to hotspots of protest activity due to the elevated risk of violence and arbitrary arrests, and refrain from discussing protest activity in conversations and on social media. Maintain a low profile and avoid any public support for the protesters, including on social media, due to the heightened risk of arbitrary arrest and detention by Iranian authorities.
4. Allot for continued and extensive disruptions to business continuity, including internet and telecommunications shutdowns.
5. Monitor the situation and update business contingency plans, accounting for scenarios such as the escalation of nationwide unrest and armed conflict.
6. In the event of military strikes against the country, shelter in place and avoid the vicinity of government, law enforcement, and military installations.

Israel:

1. Avoid nonessential travel to Israel at this time.
2. In the country, adhere to all security precautions regarding armed conflict, militancy, and civil unrest.
3. Continue monitoring regional developments and promptly adhere to all Home Front Command (HFC) notifications. Ensure that the HFC or other "Color Red" alert applications, such as "Tzofar", "Tzeva Adom", or "Cumta-Red Alerts", are downloaded to receive timely alerts.
4. Refresh and retain business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols, and ensure shelters' preparedness for extended periods to increase resilience in an escalation scenario.