

US Marine unit steams toward Middle East amid growing threats of ground invasion of Iran

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The USS Tripoli, an amphibious assault carrier bearing the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, was tracked Tuesday transiting the Strait of Malacca on its way to the Persian Gulf. The warship departed Okinawa on March 11 and is expected to arrive in the Middle East by the end of March. Its deployment comes amid growing calls within the American media and political establishment for a US ground invasion of Iranian territory.

Roughly 50,000 US service members are already in the Middle East, supported by two carrier strike groups—the USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea and the USS Gerald R. Ford in the Red Sea—with a third, the USS George H.W. Bush, steaming toward the Mediterranean. The Tripoli and its Marine force will be the first ground combat-capable unit to enter the theater.

The deployment comes amid a dramatic escalation of the war, including the Israeli assassination of Ali Larijani, the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council and the country’s de facto leader since the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the opening hours of the war on February 28.

On Tuesday, Republican Representative Pete Sessions of Texas went on CNN to openly advocate for a Marine invasion of Kharg Island—Iran’s main oil export terminal, which handles 90 percent of the country’s crude exports—while absurdly denying that this would constitute “boots on the ground.”

Sessions said: “These 2,500 Marines, the Marine Expeditionary Force, would be to probably secure the island. The island is not, in my opinion, boots on the ground in combat circumstances, it would be to secure the facility.” He distinguished an island seizure from

combat “inside Iran where they’re in the cities, where we go through circumstances we’ve had in the past of large areas of population, combatants against us, and it is a mess.”

Sessions’ remarks were even more explicit than those of Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who on Friday posted on X: “He who controls Kharg Island, controls the destiny of this war. Semper Fi”—a transparent dog whistle calling for an amphibious Marine assault on the island.

Sessions’ statements followed a *Wall Street Journal* editorial Sunday titled “The Battle for the Strait of Hormuz,” which argued that Trump must escalate rather than end the war prematurely. The editorial warned that if Iran succeeds in closing the Strait, it would establish “an Iranian veto on energy flows and winning impunity in the future.” It concluded: “Imagine how the regime would blackmail the world—and get away with it—if it were left to amass twice or three times the missiles, or nuclear weapons.”

Both the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have reported in recent days that the seizure of Kharg Island and a ground operation along the Strait of Hormuz are actively under consideration by the Trump administration. On Monday, US President Donald Trump told reporters he was “not afraid” to send troops into Iran, dismissing comparisons to Vietnam. “I’m really not afraid of anything,” Trump said.

The growing momentum toward a ground invasion reflects the failure of the administration’s efforts to overthrow the Iranian government by murdering its leaders. *Politico* reported Tuesday that some of Trump’s own allies now believe the president “no longer controls how, or when, the war ends.” One

person close to the White House told *Politico*: “We clearly just kicked [Iran’s] ass in the field, but, to a large extent, they hold the cards now. They decide how long we’re involved—and they decide if we put boots on the ground. And it doesn’t seem to me that there’s a way around that, if we want to save face.”

A second source told *Politico*: “The terms have changed. The off-ramps don’t work anymore because Iran is driving the asymmetric action.”

Despite more than two weeks of bombing—over 7,000 targets struck, more than 100 naval vessels destroyed, the supreme leader and dozens of senior officials killed—the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly 20 percent of the world’s oil passes, remains effectively closed.

Shipping through the waterway has collapsed to roughly five transits a day—a fraction of the 125 that passed through before the war—while some 1,100 vessels, a quarter of them oil tankers, sit stranded in the Gulf with nowhere to go. Crude has jumped 45 percent since February 28, from under \$70 to roughly \$100 a barrel, and American drivers are paying \$3.79 a gallon at the pump, a 25 percent increase.

The war is deepening into a broader political crisis for the administration. A Data for Progress poll conducted March 6-8 found that 52 percent of Americans believe Trump was “at least partly motivated” to attack Iran in order to distract from the Epstein scandal, including 81 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of independents. A Quinnipiac poll found 74 percent of registered voters oppose sending ground troops. Trump’s approval rating has fallen to roughly 40 percent, down from above 50 percent at the start of his term.

Meanwhile, approximately 200 US service members have been wounded since the start of Operation Epic Fury, according to US Central Command (CENTCOM), in addition to the 13 who have been killed. At least 10 suffered serious injuries, including shrapnel wounds, burns and blast-induced brain trauma.

The assassination of Larijani marks the latest in a series of “decapitation” strikes that have done nothing to end the war. Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz declared that Larijani and Basij commander Gholamreza Soleimani had been “eliminated” and had “joined Khamenei...in the depths of hell.” He added: “I have instructed the IDF to continue pursuing the leadership.”

Iran’s new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei—the son of the slain Ali Khamenei—has rejected de-escalation proposals from two intermediary countries, stating that it was not “the right time for peace until the United States and Israel are brought to their knees, accept defeat, and pay compensation.”

In Lebanon, the war continues to expand. Since March 2, Israeli bombardment has killed 912 people—111 of them children—and driven more than a million from their homes, close to a fifth of the entire population. Over 100 communities have been ordered to evacuate. The UN human rights office warned that the bombing of residential areas could constitute war crimes and that the systematic mass displacement of the population violates international humanitarian law.

In Iran, the health ministry reports at least 1,444 killed and over 18,000 injured since February 28. Amnesty International confirmed that a US attack on a school in Minab killed at least 170 people, “most of whom were schoolgirls,” and called for accountability. Three-day-old and two-year-old siblings were among those killed in a strike on Arak, along with their mother and grandmother.



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