

FOREIGN ANALYSIS

THE 2026 SPECIAL EDITION



THE REMAKING OF THE MIDDLE EAST

IRAN, ISRAEL, AND
THE UNITED STATES AT WAR

A person is seen from behind, walking away on a long, straight, paved road that stretches towards a bright, hazy horizon. The road is flanked by dry, grassy fields and rows of bare trees, suggesting an autumn or winter setting. The sky is overcast with soft, diffused light. The overall mood is one of journey, exploration, and potential.

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EMMA CARLSON - ISSUE CONTENT EDITOR

AHMET GARRET AKSU - EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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The Transformation of the Middle Eastern Security Order

The Decline of External Powers and Rise of Regional Powers

MARK N. KATZ

The 2026 U.S./Israeli military campaign against Iran is one more example of the U.S. being unable to assert its will in the Middle East through military means. The earlier U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Washington's "War on Terror" generally, were also examples of this phenomenon. There is, though, an important difference between these earlier campaigns on the one hand and the recent one on the other. The American-led military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq did succeed in quickly toppling the governments of these two countries. By contrast, the 2026 U.S./Israeli war against Iran not only failed to achieve the goal of toppling the Iranian government, but appears most unlikely to do so now. Furthermore, the U.S./Israeli war against Iran has not demonstrably succeeded in achieving its other stated goal of definitively preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

MARK N. KATZ is a professor emeritus of government and politics at the George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government, and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.



In addition, the U.S. and its allies have become worse off in that while Gulf petroleum exports flowed freely through the vital Strait of Hormuz before the war, Iran has succeeded in inhibiting petroleum exports from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf after its outbreak. The Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen are similarly attempting to inhibit Saudi petroleum exports via the Bab al-Mandab Strait at the southern end of the Red Sea. The U.S. and its allies have so far been unable to force or persuade Iran and the Houthis to stop undertaking these actions, which will serve to elevate the price of petroleum so long as they continue.

Setbacks in the war against Iran combined with the Trump administration's desire to cut back on support for allies in general, declining American public support for Israel among both Democrats and Republicans, and the Trump administration's efforts to reach a quick agreement ending the war with Iran have all served to cast doubt on America's ability and even willingness to continue acting as a great power in the Middle East. Several of America's traditional allies in the Middle East—especially in the Gulf—are highly concerned about just this. The U.S., though, is not the only external great power which has proved unable to assert its will through military means in the Middle East. The December 2024 downfall of the Assad regime in Syria, which Russia—along with Iran—had engaged in an extended military intervention to defend, has shown the limits of Russian power in the region.

Just as remarkable as the decline of American and Russian ability to act as great powers in the Middle East has been the lack of a replacement for them in this role by any other external great power. For all its economic interests and influence in the region, China has not shown a willingness to become militarily involved in the Middle East. Nor has Europe, India, or any other power in Asia or elsewhere—at least so far. This combination of factors raises a momentous possibility about the future security order in the Middle East: It is not just that the U.S. and Russia may play less of a role in the region, but that no external power may do so, thus leaving the region's security order to be shaped mainly by regional powers located within the Middle East.

WHO RULES THE MIDDLE EAST?

If this occurs, it would actually not be something new, but a reversion to an older pattern that existed before the 19th century. At least since the birth of Islam, the Middle East was usually dominated by powers internal to the region. Arab caliphates were the first of these, but with their decline, the Ottoman and Persian Empires became the most important powers in the region. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire not only became the predominant power in the Middle East, but a great power in Europe as well. From the late 18th century through the early 20th century, however, the decline of both these two Middle Eastern great powers (and, of course, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century) occurred at the same time as three external powers in particular—Britain, France, and (if one includes the Caucasus and Central Asia as part of the greater Middle East) Russia—gained influence and even control over much of the region, with Italy and Germany competing with them in this after each of their unifications in the mid-19th century. During

the 20th century, the influence of Western European countries declined while that of the U.S. and the USSR rose, especially during the Cold War era.

The decline of Moscow's influence in the Middle East that occurred in the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras contributed to America appearing to become a unipolar great power both in the Middle East and throughout the world. American influence in the Middle East, though, appeared to decline as the War on Terror went on and Russian influence made something of a comeback under Putin. During the 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries, then, external great powers played a strong role in shaping the Middle East's security order. Some of these external great powers, of course, lost influence in the region. But whenever this happened, some other external great power gained influence there. What is noteworthy about the recent decline in both Russian and American influence in the region is that these are not yet being replaced by other external great powers, at least in military terms.

External powers playing less of a role—at least for now—provides opportunities for Middle Eastern powers to once again become the principal actors in the region. However, unlike during the heyday of the Ottoman Empire when it was the predominant great power in the region before the rise of European great powers, there is not now one predominant internal great power in the Middle East like India is in South Asia, China is in East Asia, and Brazil could be in South America. In the Middle East, by contrast, there are arguably four regional great powers: Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

However, some states with smaller populations also play outsize roles, including Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar. Active Middle Eastern powers, of course, are not something new, as there have been several of these even when external great powers dominated the region. Just since the end of World War II, these have included Egypt under Nasser, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and Iran under both the Shah and the Islamic Republic. Israel, among others, has also played the role of regional power. Up until now, though, the ambitions of these regional powers were strongly supported or opposed by various external powers.

One thing is absolutely certain: the many ongoing conflicts and rivalries within the Middle East will continue whether external powers are deeply involved in the region or not.

THE MIDDLE EAST ON ITS OWN

If indeed external great powers are no longer going to be as active in supporting states and other actors in the region as they have been in the past, then what might the emerging security order of the Middle East be like? One thing is absolutely certain: the many ongoing conflicts and rivalries within the Middle East will continue whether external powers are deeply involved in the region or not. These rivalries include: Iran and its Shi'a allies (especially Hezbollah) vs. Israel; Iran and its Shi'a allies (especially the Houthis) vs. Gulf Arab states; Israel vs. Hamas and the Palestinians generally; Saudi Arabia vs.

the UAE in Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan; Türkiye vs. Israel in Syria; Türkiye vs. Egypt and the UAE in Libya; and Algeria vs. Morocco over Western Sahara.

If a new era is arriving in which external powers are no longer willing or able to intervene militarily in or provide as much military support to the Middle East as they have in the past, this may increase the incentive of Middle Eastern states to acquire nuclear weapons—especially if their rivals in the region acquire them or just seem likely to. Those opposed to nuclear proliferation understandably fear that Middle Eastern states acquiring nuclear weapons will lead to nuclear war in the region. Some observers have noted, though, that states possessing nuclear weapons have so far avoided going to war with each other. It is reasonable to ask whether Middle Eastern states possessing nuclear weapons could be expected to behave differently. Still, it must be noted that Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons has not prevented others from engaging in conflict with it via conventional means. Acquiring nuclear weapons, then, may not immunize other Middle Eastern states from involvement in conventional conflict either.

The 2026 U.S./Israeli attack on Iran has not only led to Iranian efforts to halt shipping via the Strait of Hormuz, but also to Iranian attacks on several nearby Arab states and Israel, as well as attacks by its non-state allies on them. This has led to the understandable concern of a major war spreading throughout the region, and perhaps even beyond. In my view, though, there is little appetite in the Middle East on the part of any state for engaging in a major, long-term war with large numbers of ground forces experiencing heavy casualties such as the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War or the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2022.

Indeed, the perpetrators of these two wars—Saddam Hussein in 1980 and Vladimir Putin in 2022—did not anticipate extended conflict but mistakenly hoped to gain quick victories instead. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman also appears to have mistakenly anticipated a quick victory in Yemen at the outset of the Kingdom’s intervention against the Houthis in 2015, as did Trump and Netanyahu when they launched their war against Iran in 2026. The prospect of not receiving support from external great powers might further deter Middle Eastern states from risking direct military involvement in extended ground conflict requiring them to mobilize large numbers of troops. But as previous experience has shown, an extended war can occur when a leader mistakenly believes that launching a war will result in a quick victory.

Iran has long sought to avoid involvement in ground war itself by supporting various “proxies” (Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iraqi Shi’a militias) against states that Tehran has been at odds with. To the extent that these groups engage in conflict with Iran’s regional adversaries, they subtract from the resources available to those states for engaging in direct conflict with Iran. Going forward, Iranian support for nonstate allies willing to fight Iran’s adversaries might be even more effective if the latter are no longer receiving as much assistance from external powers as before. Still, there are limits to the effectiveness of Iran’s strategy.

To begin with, “proxies” are independent actors in their own right with their own agendas. They will not necessarily fight against Iran’s opponents when Tehran wants them to or stop fighting at Tehran’s direction either.

Further, as the experiences of both the Assad regime in 2024 and Hamas since October 2023 have shown, Iran may not be able to prevent its allies from being defeated or seriously weakened. Finally, supporting “proxies” is a game that others can play too. Iran’s adversaries can retaliate by supporting various nonstate actors willing to fight Iran or its allies, such as anti-Shi’a Sunni movements (including Al Qaeda affiliates) or Iran’s many non-Persian minorities.

Another strategy that Middle Eastern states can pursue in an environment where conflict and rivalry in the region continue but involvement by external powers in them declines is the formation of regional alliances against common adversaries. Indeed, this process has already begun to some extent. The UAE and Israel have been cooperating with each other in the security realm, and both have been supporting Somaliland (the part of northern Somalia seeking recognition for the independence of former British Somaliland from its unification with former Italian Somaliland after both became independent in 1960). The August 2026 Mecca Joint Defense Agreement between Türkiye, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia is another example of regional alliance formation.

There has also been growing cooperation between the four main Sunni powers in the greater Middle East: Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan. Given the multiplicity of disagreements in the Middle East, however, this process will only succeed if states at odds on some issues are able to put aside their differences for the sake of joint cooperation against common adversaries. Such alliances, though, could be temporary and ever-changing. There could also be surprises. If Netanyahu’s successors continue his apparent belief that “Türkiye is worse than Iran,” then a logical consequence of this is that Israel might one day seek an alliance (even if tacit) with Iran!

MIXED PICTURE

Just because external great powers are currently seeking to reduce their involvement, or avoid becoming involved, in the Middle East, this may not always be the case. As in the past, Middle Eastern states fearing their neighbors may actively, even desperately, seek their support. External great powers may also want to become more involved as their domestic political circumstances and foreign policy concerns change. One strong incentive they may have for increasing their involvement may, as in the past, be the desire to prevent their great-power rivals from becoming predominant in the region—a fear that Middle Eastern actors have often exploited in the past.

In other words: the era of external great powers avoiding involvement in the Middle East that currently appears to be dawning may well prove to be temporary. Yet even if some external great powers resume and others begin playing an active role in the Middle East, the future security order of the region is likely to be one in which militarily and economically stronger Middle Eastern states play a stronger role in the region. Indeed, those Middle Eastern states that can may even pursue their rivalries through playing an active role in supporting rival powers within neighboring regions, such as Africa, the former Soviet Union, and perhaps even Europe and the West more broadly.

The Transformation of the Middle Eastern Security Order

The relationship between Middle Eastern powers and external ones may become even more complex than it has been in the past.

America at War Again

What the Iran War Reveals About U.S. Global Leadership

JOHN CALABRESE

The U.S.-Iran war has become the most consequential American military engagement in the Middle East since the 2003 Iraq invasion. Despite periodic ceasefires and diplomatic efforts, the conflict has revealed that 21st-century power is not determined by military dominance alone. The United States has demonstrated unmatched force-projection capabilities, severely degrading Iran's conventional forces, yet battlefield success has not produced a durable political settlement or fundamentally altered Tehran's strategy. Instead, the conflict has settled into a cycle of coercion, adaptation, economic pressure, proxy warfare, and renewed confrontation.

JOHN CALABRESE is an assistant professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University and non-resident senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.



This dynamic reflects a broader shift in strategic competition. Post-Cold War American strategy assumed that overwhelming military superiority could deter adversaries and shape political outcomes. Today's rivals increasingly challenge U.S. objectives through asymmetric tactics, political resilience, information operations, economic leverage, and endurance rather than conventional parity. The central lesson is that military power generates leverage; political, economic, technological, and institutional capabilities determine whether that leverage produces durable outcomes. The challenge for Washington is to translate its enduring strengths into a sustainable Middle East strategy—one that preserves deterrence, reassures partners, and shapes political realities without relying primarily on repeated military intervention.

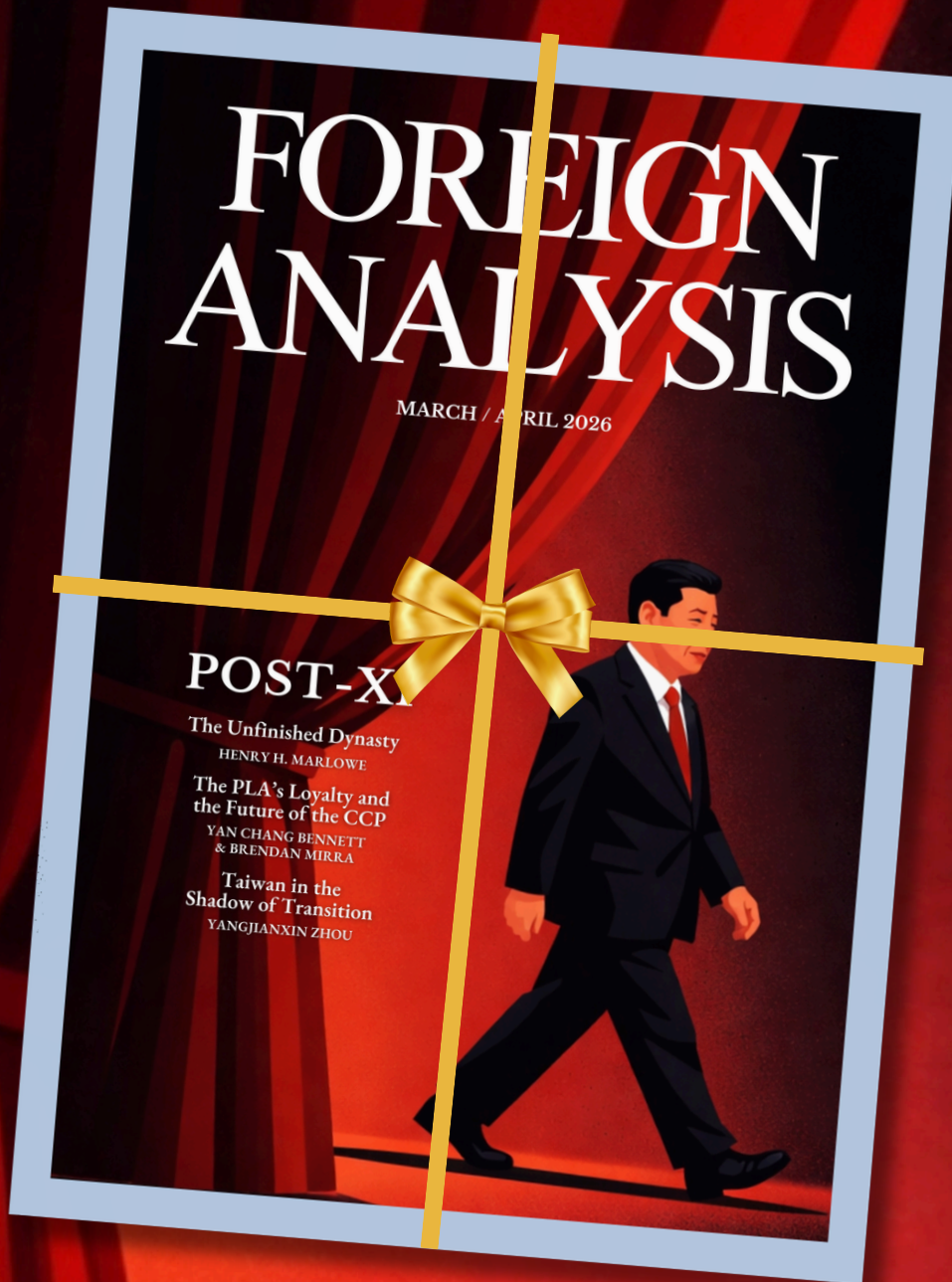
AMERICA'S STRATEGY GAP

The strategic dilemmas exposed by the U.S.-Iran war are the culmination of three decades of American statecraft. Since the Cold War's end, the United States has sought to preserve an international order anchored by unrivaled military capabilities, global force projection, and an extensive alliance network. Those advantages remain formidable. The enduring challenge has been translating overwhelming military superiority into durable political outcomes. During the 1990s, that translation appeared almost automatic. The 1991 Gulf War validated a model of limited political objectives pursued through overwhelming force and broad international legitimacy. Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait reinforced confidence that American military dominance, coupled with diplomatic restraint, could preserve regional stability at acceptable cost, strengthening faith in the ability of superior capabilities to produce favorable political outcomes.

Subsequent interventions steadily eroded that confidence. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq demonstrated that removing a regime proved far easier than building a legitimate political order. Afghanistan exposed the difficulty of generating political legitimacy through military intervention. Libya showed how regime collapse could produce prolonged instability and regional disorder. Across these campaigns, the United States consistently defeated organized military resistance while struggling to shape the political environments that followed. These experiences exposed the limits of treating military superiority as a substitute for political strategy. Military force can eliminate threats, deter aggression, and create diplomatic opportunities, yet durable political order depends upon legitimate institutions, effective governance, and political accommodation. The expectation that overwhelming military superiority could reliably engineer favorable political outcomes reflected the unique strategic conditions of the immediate post-Cold War era, when American predominance faced no serious geopolitical challenger.

The U.S.-Iran war signals the arrival of a different strategic environment. Contemporary competition rewards resilience, adaptation, and political endurance alongside military capability. Adversaries understand that conventional victory over the United States lies beyond reach. Their objective

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is therefore to preserve their own political cohesion, impose cumulative costs, and deny Washington the ability to convert military superiority into lasting strategic advantage. Viewed in this broader historical context, the U.S.-Iran war marks another stage in the evolution of international politics. Military primacy remains the foundation of American power. The harder task is converting that power into durable political leverage through diplomacy, economic statecraft, technological capacity, and political leadership.

THE ANATOMY OF THE U.S.-IRAN WAR

The conflict demonstrates how this broader transformation operates in practice. Operationally, the United States has displayed military capabilities unmatched by any other power. Strategically, the war has evolved into a prolonged contest of political endurance in which military operations, economic coercion, diplomacy, and asymmetric competition unfold simultaneously. The war began in June 2025 as a limited U.S.-Israeli campaign to degrade Iran's nuclear infrastructure and long-range missile capabilities while restoring regional deterrence. Iranian retaliation against American forces and regional partners quickly expanded the conflict into sustained military operations. The campaign showcased the breadth of American capabilities: integrated air and missile defenses, precision strikes, advanced intelligence networks, cyber operations, and the logistical capacity to sustain high-intensity operations across a distant theater.

Operational success, however, produced leverage without resolution. Iran's conventional forces suffered severe attrition, but its political institutions, decision-making structures, and strategic objectives remained intact. Tehran shifted the contest toward domains where asymmetry favored it: proxy networks, cyber operations, maritime disruption, information campaigns, and calibrated missile and drone attacks that imposed continuing costs while preserving its ability to sustain pressure. The collapse of June 2026 ceasefire negotiations underscored the limits of military leverage. Battlefield gains created diplomatic openings, but core disputes over Iran's nuclear program, regional influence, sanctions, and long-term security arrangements remained unresolved. As talks failed, both sides returned to coercive measures, reinforcing a cycle of confrontation rather than producing a durable settlement.

The continuing contest over the Strait of Hormuz further illustrates this changing character of power. Despite heavy military losses, Iran retained the ability to threaten a critical maritime chokepoint, generating uncertainty across global energy markets and commerce. Influence increasingly depends not only on conventional capabilities but also on the ability to exploit vulnerabilities in economic networks, information systems, political coalitions, and supply chains. These dynamics impose costs beyond the immediate theater.

Every carrier strike group deployed to the Gulf, air-defense system shifted from the Indo-Pacific, and hour of senior policymaker attention devoted to Iranian escalation represents an opportunity cost for Washington's stated priority of sustaining deterrence against China. For more than a decade, U.S.

strategy has identified the Indo-Pacific as the region most likely to shape the future balance of power, yet the Middle East continues to consume the resources and attention required for that reorientation.



AIRCROWS ON THE AIRFIELD AT RAF MILDENHALL, NORFOLK, WHERE THEY ARE FLYING KC-135 STRATOTANKER AIRCRAFT AS PART OF EXERCISE COMBAT ARCHER UK 2026 (CA-UK '26), AN ANNUAL U.S. AIR FORCES IN EUROPE AND AIR FORCES AFRICA-HOSTED AIR-TO-AIR WEAPONS SYSTEM EVALUATION EXERCISE THAT ENSURES HIGH-END COMBAT READINESS IN THE EUROPEAN THEATRE. PICTURE DATE: TUESDAY, JULY 14, 2026. (PHOTO BY BEN BIRCHALL/PA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES)

This tension is not new—the “pivot to Asia” foundered on similar rocks a decade earlier—but the U.S.-Iran war has sharpened it considerably. Beijing has watched American forces and attention drawn once again toward the Gulf and has drawn its own conclusions about the limits of U.S. strategic bandwidth. The war is therefore not only a Middle Eastern contest; it is also, indirectly, a test of whether Washington can sustain competition across multiple theaters simultaneously without one perpetually crowding out the other. Perhaps the conflict’s most important lesson concerns the strategic value of time. Iran’s strategy rests on preserving political cohesion, sustaining public resolve, and imposing cumulative costs that complicate American decision-making.

For weaker actors, endurance can substitute for conventional strength: they need to absorb pressure, preserve political cohesion, and impose costs until the stronger power’s commitment begins to erode. Success increasingly belongs to the actor that can adapt continuously, maintain domestic and institutional cohesion, and sustain competition over time. The central question for American strategy is why unmatched operational performance so often produces limited political returns. The answer lies in the assumptions that have long shaped Washington’s use of force.

THE FAILURE OF THE KINETIC PARADIGM

The recurring gap between battlefield success and strategic frustration reflects the persistence of what might be called the “kinetic paradigm”—an institutional tendency to treat operational effects as the clearest measure of strategic progress and to expect political gains to follow. Within this framework, strategy centers on identifying targets, degrading capabilities, managing escalation, and restoring deterrence, with political success expected to flow from operational effectiveness instead of sustained political design. The appeal of this approach is obvious. The United States possesses

unmatched military capabilities, from precision strike and intelligence networks to cyber, space, and global logistical reach. These tools provide policymakers with tangible measures of progress: destroyed targets, degraded infrastructure, intercepted threats, and successful operations. Political progress, by contrast, unfolds gradually through ambiguous and difficult-to-measure outcomes.

Yet modern conflict consistently demonstrates that operational and strategic success follow different logics. States rarely abandon core political objectives because their military capabilities have been degraded. Regime survival, ideological commitment, domestic legitimacy, and geopolitical interests often sustain resistance despite battlefield losses. Military campaigns alter the balance of capabilities; political incentives determine whether those changes translate into strategic outcomes.

The U.S.-Iran war illustrates this dynamic. American operations severely degraded Iranian military infrastructure while demonstrating overwhelming technological and operational superiority. Tehran nevertheless preserved its strategic objectives by shifting competition into domains where asymmetry offered greater leverage. These methods allowed Iran to sustain pressure while maintaining the cohesion required for prolonged competition. Iran reflects a broader pattern in contemporary strategic competition. Weaker states facing superior adversaries increasingly rely on adaptation, shifting contests into political complexity, economic interdependence, information warfare, cyber operations, and the strategic value of time. These arenas dilute conventional military advantages and reward endurance, resilience, and cumulative pressure. Strategic success increasingly depends on shaping the political environment surrounding military operations as effectively as the battlefield itself.

The kinetic paradigm therefore rests on an incomplete conception of strategy. Military force remains indispensable, in that it creates leverage, deters aggression, reassures allies, and constrains adversaries. But political strategy converts leverage into durable outcomes by integrating force with diplomacy, governance, economic statecraft, and coalition management. Operational excellence without political integration produces impressive campaigns but unresolved strategic contests. This pattern reflects deeper characteristics of the institutions responsible for generating American national security policy. Those institutions excel at producing military effectiveness because they were designed for that purpose. Contemporary competition, however, increasingly rewards integration across diplomacy, economics, technology, alliances, and information. The challenge lies in converting America's many sources of strength into coherent strategic leverage in a more complex and contested environment.

HOW WEAKER STATES ENDURE

The U.S.-Iran war demonstrates that contemporary conflict can no longer be assessed primarily through conventional military capabilities. Iran has remained strategically competitive not by matching American military power, but by developing a form of resilience designed to absorb pressure, adapt, and

impose costs despite profound conventional disadvantages. Its experience illustrates a broader transformation in how weaker states compete against dominant powers. For decades, Tehran has pursued strategic dispersion. Unable to confront the United States directly, it invested in proxy organizations, missile and drone forces, cyber capabilities, maritime disruption, regional political networks, and information operations. These instruments were designed to complicate American decision-making by expanding the arenas of competition, dispersing risk, and increasing the political and economic costs of sustained engagement.

Military superiority
can overcome
operational
challenges; it cannot
substitute for
sustained political
purpose.

The conflict has validated this approach. As Iranian conventional capabilities suffered extensive degradation, Tehran increasingly relied on methods that conventional force alone struggles to neutralize. Political influence, ideological commitment, decentralized organizations, financial networks, and social legitimacy are far harder to dismantle through military means. Modern resilience therefore rests on the political, organizational, and societal

structures that enable continued adaptation after battlefield losses. Technological change has reinforced this transformation. Cyber operations, information campaigns, autonomous systems, and emerging digital capabilities allow states and non-state actors to influence perceptions, disrupt decision-making, and impose costs across multiple domains simultaneously. Technology has expanded the reach of asymmetric strategies by enabling actors with fewer conventional resources to exploit vulnerabilities within more powerful adversaries. Time further magnifies this advantage. Prolonged competition creates opportunities for weaker actors to exploit domestic divisions, alliance pressures, economic strains, and shifts in international opinion. Prolonged competition can become a strategic asset for weaker actors. Success increasingly depends on the ability to preserve political cohesion while continuously adapting methods of competition.

The implications extend well beyond Iran. Similar dynamics are evident in conflicts involving state and non-state actors across multiple regions, suggesting that resilience is becoming as important a measure of national power as conventional military capability. Strategic success in coming decades will depend on projecting force effectively while understanding how adversaries adapt, how political systems sustain prolonged competition, and how military operations integrate with broader strategies built for long-term contests. That realization brings the domestic foundations of American power into sharper focus.

LEADERSHIP UNDER PRESSURE

The strategic transformation revealed by the U.S.-Iran war cannot be understood through military capability or institutional design alone. It also reflects profound changes in the domestic foundations of American power.

During much of the Cold War, domestic politics shaped foreign policy, yet a broad bipartisan consensus generally supported the United States' global role. That consensus did not eliminate disagreement, but it provided successive administrations with the continuity required to pursue long-term strategies across multiple presidencies. That political environment has become far more fragmented. Contemporary debates increasingly concern the value of international leadership itself, the costs of alliance commitments, and the willingness of Americans to sustain prolonged overseas engagement. Domestic polarization, accelerated information flows, and competing narratives have made political cohesion an increasingly scarce strategic resource.

The U.S.-Iran war has unfolded within this environment. Decisions involving military operations, sanctions, diplomacy, energy markets, and alliance commitments have become subjects of intense domestic contestation. American strategy has consequently struggled to project the consistency on which deterrence and diplomatic credibility depend. Military superiority can overcome operational challenges; it cannot substitute for sustained political purpose.

That deficit was compounded by the conduct of the war's principal decision-maker. President Trump articulated shifting objectives—from degrading Iran's missile and naval capabilities to preventing nuclear breakout and, at times, calling for regime change before later denying that it was ever the goal. Senior officials frequently contradicted one another and the president, while Trump's own statements alternated between declaring victory and threatening renewed strikes. For allies and adversaries alike, this volatility obscured what a satisfactory endpoint required, weakening the clarity of purpose on which coercive credibility depends.

Adversaries have recognized this vulnerability. Iran's strategy has long rested on the belief that tactical setbacks need not become strategic defeat if political divisions within the United States can be prolonged. Calibrated escalation, proxy warfare, maritime disruption, cyber operations, and information campaigns have sought to complicate American decision-making by increasing the duration and costs of competition. This reflects a broader reality of contemporary strategy: time itself has become an instrument of coercion. Prolonged competition places pressure on political consensus, fiscal resources, alliance cohesion, and public patience. Strategic success therefore depends not only on battlefield performance but on sustaining domestic legitimacy over time.

This argument does not diminish the value of democratic debate. Open political competition remains an American strength, providing adaptability, accountability, and resilience. The challenge is sustaining long-term national purpose amid vigorous disagreement. Political cohesion has become not simply a condition for effective foreign policy but a strategic asset. The changing character of conflict has also transformed the meaning of alliances. For much of the post-Cold War era, American alliances were viewed primarily as force multipliers that extended deterrence and enabled military operations. Those functions remain essential, but the U.S.-Iran war demonstrates that alliances now also serve as mechanisms for political resilience, collective adaptation, and strategic endurance.

Throughout the conflict, regional partners continued to rely on the United States for intelligence, advanced military capabilities, diplomatic coordination, and reassurance. Yet Iran's ability to threaten partners and strike facilities associated with the American presence exposed vulnerabilities in traditional security arrangements. U.S. bases provide protection, but they can also become targets adversaries seek to exploit. This erosion of confidence predates the war. Three decades of American interventions that removed adversary regimes without producing durable political order—in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya—have led regional partners to question whether Washington's commitments will outlast its attention. The muted U.S. response to the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure reinforced the perception that American protection was most reliable when U.S. interests, rather than partners' security, were directly at stake.

This tension reflects a broader evolution in American leadership. The United States remains the essential security partner for many countries, yet deterrence increasingly depends on more than forward-deployed military power. In an era of asymmetric competition, adversaries seek to bypass conventional advantages by targeting political cohesion, economic stability, and public confidence. Effective alliances therefore require not only military integration but also resilience against coercion and disruption. The U.S.-Iran war suggests that future American leadership will depend increasingly on organizing networks of partners capable of sharing risks, absorbing shocks, and sustaining collective action.

Washington's role is shifting from sole guarantor toward coalition organizer, requiring a balance between reassurance and burden-sharing, credibility and restraint, presence and flexibility. Leadership itself is consequently being redefined. Military superiority will remain essential to American influence. The greater challenge is converting that superiority into strategic leverage by building and sustaining coalitions that combine political cohesion, economic capacity, and military strength.

BEYOND VICTORY

The U.S.-Iran war will be remembered for its military operations, diplomatic crises, and regional consequences. Its deeper significance lies in what it reveals about the changing character of power. The conflict marks another stage in the evolution of international politics away from an era when overwhelming military superiority could reliably produce political outcomes and toward one in which influence increasingly depends on resilience, legitimacy, institutional adaptability, and strategic integration. This evolution does not diminish American power. The United States continues to possess military capabilities, technological innovation, alliance networks, and economic resources unmatched by any potential rival. The paradox revealed by the war is that extraordinary military advantages achieve their greatest effect when reinforced by the political conditions that convert power into lasting strategic outcomes.

The central challenge confronting American statecraft is therefore conceptual. Future conflicts will unfold across interconnected military,

political, technological, economic, informational, and societal domains. Success will depend on integrating these instruments into strategies capable of sustaining advantage over prolonged competition. For the United States, that means strengthening the domestic foundations of national power, revitalizing alliances as instruments of collective resilience, and integrating diplomacy and economic statecraft with military planning. Military superiority will remain indispensable, yet its strategic value will increasingly depend on the ability to translate power into durable political outcomes.

The defining question confronting American leadership in the twenty-first century is whether Washington can translate immense power into durable political outcomes while maintaining the domestic consensus necessary to sustain that role. Future influence will depend on whether Washington can sustain the political purpose at home, the coalitions abroad, and the strategic integration required to turn military superiority into durable influence.

Israel's Iran War

Why Winning the Battle May Be Losing the War

JOSEPH MANSOUR

By almost any conventional military measure, Israel has won this war. Since the United States and Israel opened the campaign against Iran on February 28, 2026, with strikes that included the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Israeli and American forces have demonstrated a level of tactical dominance that would have seemed unthinkable a decade ago. Iranian air defenses have been repeatedly penetrated. Senior commanders have been killed in their homes and offices. Nuclear and military infrastructure has been struck with precision that Iranian officials themselves have struggled to downplay publicly.

JOSEPH MANSOUR served as a Parliamentary Aide for International Affairs in the Israeli Knesset and holds an MA in International Law, Human Rights & Transitional Justice from Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He focus on U.S. foreign policy, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israeli politics, and Middle East geopolitics.



And yet, more than five months into the war, the Islamic Republic still governs Iran. Its Revolutionary Guard Corps is not broken but hardened. And in the one arena where Iran can still make the entire world feel the cost of this conflict—the flow of oil and gas through the Strait of Hormuz—Tehran has arguably won.

This is the paradox at the center of Israel's war against Iran: extraordinary tactical success has not produced strategic victory. The question this article sets out to answer is not whether Israel can win battles. It clearly can. The question is whether Israel is winning the war, or whether, in the absence of a defined political endgame, it is becoming trapped in one it cannot decisively end.

THE LOGIC OF ISRAELI MILITARY SUPERIORITY

The scale of Israeli and American operational success since February should not be understated. The assassination of Khamenei alone represents a feat of intelligence penetration and operational execution that few military establishments in the world could replicate. Beyond that singular strike, Israeli and American forces have carried out sustained campaigns against Iranian nuclear facilities, military command infrastructure, and the leadership tiers of the IRGC.

These operations reflect a doctrine that has evolved considerably since Israel's earlier, more limited strikes against Iranian proxies and nuclear scientists. What has unfolded since February is not covert sabotage but open, sustained aerial warfare, in tandem with American airpower and naval assets, reaching deep into Iranian territory with a frequency and intensity that 47 years of conflict with Iran have not seen. The war's opening weeks alone saw a volume of strike activity against a state actor that has few recent parallels outside of full interstate war.

It is worth pausing on how remarkable this is by historical standards. Israel's 1981 strike on Osirak and its 2007 strike on Syria's al-Kibar reactor were each single, discrete operations, high-risk, high-reward, and over within hours. What has unfolded since February 2026 is categorically different: a sustained campaign, conducted over months, against a state with a far larger territory, population, and air defense architecture than either Iraq or Syria possessed at the time of those earlier strikes. That Israel and the United States have been able to sustain this tempo of operations for months without a catastrophic loss of aircraft or a collapse of operational security is itself a significant achievement, and one that will likely be studied by military planners for years regardless of how the broader war concludes.

Much of this success rests on an intelligence and targeting apparatus that has evidently mapped Iran's military and political leadership with startling precision. The integration of real-time targeting data, cyber penetration, and human intelligence has allowed Israel to strike moving and hardened targets with a consistency that has visibly rattled Tehran's command structure. This is not the deterrence-by-threat posture Israel maintained for decades. It is a doctrine of preemption, openly exercised at scale.



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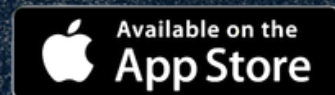
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This shift matters beyond the immediate war. For years, Israeli strategic doctrine toward Iran rested on a combination of covert action, sanctions pressure applied through Washington, and the implicit threat of a future strike that could, if necessary, be executed. What the past five months have demonstrated is that Israel is both willing and able to convert that implicit threat into sustained, open military action without waiting for a singular triggering event like a nuclear breakout. Whether this represents a durable new doctrine or a war-specific escalation driven by the aftermath of October 7 remains an open question, but either way, it has already reshaped how Iran, and every other actor in the region, has to calculate the credibility of Israeli threats going forward.

In the war's opening months, these operations produced real, measurable disruption: degraded command-and-control capacity, damaged proxy networks across the region, and at least a temporary restoration of the deterrent credibility Israel had spent years trying to rebuild after October 7. Iranian-backed proxy networks across the region absorbed significant damage to their leadership and logistics chains during the war's early phase, complicating Tehran's ability to project pressure on Israel indirectly even as the direct war with Iran continued. Judged purely on the battlefield, this looks like a decisive campaign.

THE LIMITS OF MILITARY POWER

What the campaign has not produced is regime collapse, and there is little indication one is imminent. This should not be surprising. Wars of external pressure have historically been more likely to consolidate authoritarian regimes than dislodge them, particularly when framed domestically as a battle for national survival against foreign aggression. Iran's government has leaned into precisely this framing, and the assassination of Khamenei, however tactically remarkable, has not produced the kind of institutional vacuum or elite defection that regime-change theories of coercive airpower depend on.

The historical record on this point is not encouraging for those who hoped sustained strikes might produce internal collapse. Decades of airpower-centric coercion campaigns, from the strategic bombing of Germany in the Second World War to the bombing campaigns against North Vietnam, have repeatedly demonstrated that sustained external pressure, absent ground occupation or a credible internal alternative to the existing government, tends to harden a population's identification with the state rather than turn it against its leadership. Iran's clerical establishment, whatever its unpopularity on other grounds, has substantial experience translating external threat into domestic cohesion, and there is little in the war's trajectory so far to suggest this instance is an exception.

If anything, the pressure appears to have strengthened the position of Iran's most hardline factions. The IRGC has consolidated authority over the country's response to the war, and the space for reformist or moderate voices within Iranian politics, always narrow, has contracted further. Iran's Parliament has moved to formalize a more confrontational posture on

multiple fronts, including its approach to the Strait of Hormuz, discussed below. This is the classic trajectory of a state under sustained external attack: not toward accommodation, but toward a more securitized, risk-tolerant posture in which further escalation becomes politically survivable, even expected.



TWO ARMED MEMBERS OF IRAN'S POLICE SPECIAL FORCES STAND BEHIND A COUNTRY FLAG PLACED ON AN ARMORED MILITARY VEHICLE DURING A PRO-GOVERNMENT RALLY IN DOWNTOWN TEHRAN, IRAN, ON JANUARY 12, 2026. THE RALLY TAKES PLACE IN TEHRAN AGAINST THE RECENT ANTI-GOVERNMENT UNREST AND OPPOSITION TO THE U.S. AND ISRAEL IN IRAN, AND IN SUPPORT OF SUPREME LEADER AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI. (PHOTO BY MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES)

This matters for how the war is likely to be remembered even if Israeli and American strikes continue to achieve tactical success in the months ahead. A weakened, more marginal reformist wing means fewer plausible negotiating partners on the Iranian side who might have been willing, in a different political environment, to trade meaningful concessions for sanctions relief or a durable settlement. The war has, in effect, narrowed its own off-ramps by empowering the factions within Iran's government least inclined to use them.

There is a real danger in reading Iran's continued resistance as evidence of weakness rather than resolve. Iranian officials have shown a consistent willingness to absorb significant military losses without capitulating on the war's core terms. Speaker of Parliament Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf's comment that "management of the Strait will never return to the way it was before the war" is not the language of a government preparing to fold. It is the language of a government that has concluded it can outlast the pressure being applied to it.

This is precisely where the danger of strategic overconfidence becomes most acute. When a policy of sustained pressure fails to produce the anticipated capitulation, there are typically only two responses available: escalate further, or reassess the theory of the case. So far, the pattern in Washington and Jerusalem has leaned toward the former: more strikes, tighter blockades, harsher rhetoric, on the apparent assumption that greater pressure will eventually cross Tehran's threshold of endurance. Nearly six months of evidence suggests that threshold may be considerably higher than initially assumed.

THE DETERRENCE QUESTION

Israel's early operational successes could be read as a restoration of deterrence after the trauma of October 7. That reading deserves more scrutiny than it has received. Deterrence is not measured by the ability to strike; it is measured by the adversary's willingness, going forward, to avoid the behavior the strikes were meant to punish. By that standard, the picture is far less clear. Iran has not de-escalated. It has adapted.

The distinction matters more than it might first appear. A state that absorbs a devastating strike and immediately sues for terms has been deterred. A state that absorbs a devastating strike, reorganizes its command structure, and continues fighting on modified terms has not been deterred so much as it has been forced to adapt its methods. Iran's continued willingness to contest the Strait of Hormuz, to exchange strikes with U.S. and Israeli forces, and to reject repeated American diplomatic overtures on terms it considers unfavorable, all point toward the latter category, however uncomfortable that conclusion may be for those who framed the war's early phase as a deterrence success.

Since the war began, the pattern has been strike, retaliation, brief pause, and renewed strike, repeating across more than five months with no durable ceasefire holding for more than a few weeks at a time. Each cycle has lowered the threshold for what counts as a justifiable escalation on both sides. Red lines that would once have been considered catastrophic—direct strikes on senior leadership, sustained attacks on critical infrastructure—have now been crossed multiple times by both parties without producing the kind of decisive outcome that would end the cycle.

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This dynamic has a name in the deterrence literature: the ratchet effect, in which each round of escalation resets the baseline for what both sides consider tolerable, making the next round of escalation both more likely and less remarkable when it occurs. Diplomatic announcements of imminent ceasefires have, on multiple occasions, been followed within days by renewed strikes, a sequence repeated often enough that it has become its own recognizable pattern rather than a series of isolated failures. Each collapse further erodes the credibility of the next announced breakthrough, making a durable settlement harder to achieve even if both sides eventually arrive at terms they might otherwise accept.

This is where tactical brilliance risks becoming a strategic liability. Confidence born of repeated operational success can lead to a systematic underestimation of an adversary's capacity and willingness to escalate in return. Iran's demonstrated ability to sustain damage to its energy exports, its military infrastructure, and even its top leadership, while still finding ways to impose real costs on the other side, suggests a level of strategic endurance that the war's early framing did not anticipate.

The risk going forward is not merely that this miscalculation continues, but that it compounds. A government that has repeatedly underestimated an adversary's staying power is at heightened risk of either overreaching,

through strikes calibrated to a resolve that no longer accurately describes the adversary, or of becoming trapped in a posture of continuous escalation because de-escalation has come to look, politically, like an admission that the strategy has failed. Neither outcome serves the interests of a durable and favorable resolution.

STRATEGIC TRAP

Perhaps the most consequential failure of the campaign is not military but political: almost six months in, there is no clearly articulated theory of how this war ends. There has been no regime change. There has been no durable negotiated settlement, despite repeated announcements of imminent breakthroughs that have collapsed within days, a pattern that has itself become a story, with even sympathetic American commentary now openly noting that the administration "touts big peace deals... but struggles to follow through." Military action without a defined political objective tends, over time, to become an end in itself.

This absence of a defined endgame is not a minor procedural gap. It is the central strategic failure of the war. Every major military campaign in modern history that has succeeded in translating tactical dominance into durable political outcomes has done so because its architects defined, in advance, what victory would concretely look like and calibrated military action toward that definition. What has characterized this war instead is a rolling series of tactical objectives—degrade this capability, eliminate that leader, disrupt this network—pursued without a clear answer to the question of what Iran's government, or the region, is supposed to look like once those objectives are achieved.

What increasingly looks likely is not a decisive resolution in either direction, but the normalization of an ongoing, low-grade war, punctuated by periodic escalations, as the region's baseline condition. This is arguably the most dangerous outcome of all: not a war that is won or lost, but a war that simply continues, absorbed into the fabric of regional politics as background noise rather than resolved conflict.

Iran, for its part, has not merely disrupted this traffic opportunistically. It has built institutional infrastructure around the disruption, establishing a "Persian Gulf Strait Authority" in May and asserting that no vessel may transit without a permit it issues, alongside compensation demands directed at "nations that have harmed Iran." Whatever one makes of the legal validity of these claims, given that the strait includes Omani as well as Iranian territorial waters, the practical effect has been real and sustained: Iran has demonstrated the ability to impose lasting costs on the global economy, using the one piece of geography over which it retains genuine leverage, regardless of what happens to its military assets elsewhere.

It should be noted that the United States has also reimposed its own naval blockade on Iranian ports, meaning the disruption to regional shipping is not Iran's doing alone. But this dual-blockade reality does not undercut the argument here; it reinforces it. Even accounting for American and allied countermeasures, the strait remains substantially closed nearly six months

on, and neither side has demonstrated the ability to reopen it on its own terms. That is itself the strategic story: a chokepoint that both sides can disrupt, but that neither can fully control, has become a permanent pressure point on the global economy rather than a temporary casualty of war.

The costs extend beyond energy markets. The International Energy Agency has warned that the world is drawing down oil stockpiles at a pace that becomes more precarious the longer the strait remains substantially closed. Shipping companies have rerouted significant volumes around the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks to transit times and raising freight costs across global supply chains that have already absorbed years of disruption from other crises. None of this shows up on a battlefield map, but all of it represents a real and mounting cost of a war that has not defined what it is trying to achieve.

WINNING THE WRONG WAR

Israel's military achievements in this war are real, and they should not be minimized. The operational sophistication on display, from the assassination of Khamenei to the sustained degradation of Iranian military infrastructure, represents a genuine and historic demonstration of capability. But military capability and strategic victory are not the same thing, and almost six months into this war, the gap between them has become the defining fact of the conflict.

Iran's regime has not collapsed. Its hardline factions have consolidated rather than fractured. And in the Strait of Hormuz, it has found a form of leverage that battlefield losses elsewhere cannot fully offset, one that inflicts continuing costs on the United States, Israel, and the global economy alike, with no resolution in sight. If tactical superiority was meant to produce a decisive and favorable end to this conflict, that end remains as undefined today as it was in February.

The central question with which this war began, whether Israel is shaping the outcome or being shaped by it, remains unresolved. But the longer this conflict continues without a coherent political endgame, the more the answer appears to tilt toward the latter. Without a defined theory of victory, even the most precise strikes risk becoming not the foundation of security, but the architecture of an open-ended war that neither side has yet found a way to win.

Iran Under Fire

Why War Is Reshaping—Not Removing—the Islamic Republic

ADRIENNE LIVINGSTON

The war in Iran has left many contemplating how the Islamic Republic has successfully maintained its grasp on power rather than collapsing after months of sustained military pressure from both the United States and Israel. The war saw multiple leaders of the IRGC eliminated and the head of state, Ayatollah Khamenei, assassinated. It would not be unreasonable to assume this would bring the ruling power to the verge of collapse. However, the IRGC quickly adapted to its newfound conditions. Based on this outcome, it is clear that this war has strengthened and empowered this authoritarian state rather than weaken or removed it.

ADRIENNE LIVINGSTON is an MA graduate in international relations at James Madison University. Her interests include radical terror ideologies, Middle East affairs, and women's rights issues internationally.



he IRGC has proven itself to be a malleable power source that can take the full onslaught of American and Israeli military might and reshape itself politically, institutionally, and ideologically to its new conditions. The Islamic Republic's response to the war was a true display of their capabilities and the preparations the IRGC has made to defend itself. The strongest weapon in their arsenal, shutting off access to the Strait of Hormuz, was implemented without hesitation causing a massive ripple effect throughout the world. The Islamic Republic's decision to attack their Gulf State neighbors also demonstrates their willingness to drag the entire region into war if necessary. Not only did this war prove the United States to be much weaker militarily than it presents itself on the world stage, but it also propped the Islamic Republic up to be the region's most unpredictable yet formidable actor.

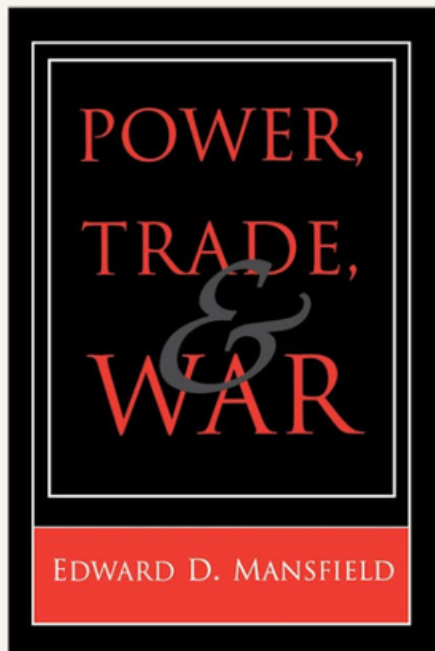
It is hard to conceive how such an ideologically oppressive regime came to fruition and has held power for over fifty years. The people of Iran have not had a reprieve or taste of freedom for a century. One dictatorship overthrows another and the cycle continues. The Islamic Republic is no different. The regime that preceded the Islamic Republic was not guided by religious fervor but rather monarchical ferocity. Prior to the Islamic Republic, the Pahlavi monarchy controlled Iran. Reza Shah Pahlavi ascended to power in 1925.

His tenure focused on military might and Western allyship to modernize Iran. His reign also saw the repression of Iran's minority groups, as well as political dissidents, and centralized power in the monarchy. Following in his father's footsteps, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ascended as the leader of the dictatorship in 1941, with any opposition arrested by a secret police force, the SAVAK, and taken for torture in prisons whose locations were unknown to the populace. This created an environment of constant terror. Anyone and everyone could have been a SAVAK agent.

Even if one had not voiced opposition to the Shah, detainment and torture were still a possibility, as charges were often nonexistent. Trials consisted of one judge while the defendant had no legal representation, and the sentences were set immediately. Extrajudicial executions were a commonplace sentence under the Shah, with the bodies often not returned to the families. Through this time marred by silence, people found respite in their mosques, where they were free to discuss ideas, complaints, and even dissent. This cultivated the people's dependence on religion, and eventually Islam became their path to liberation.

Ayatollah Khomeini became a resounding voice for the fall of the Shah. Revolution came in 1979 when the young leftists joined with the religious fanatics. War broke out in the streets, and Tehran became a battlefield with blood covering every part of the city. The Shah was quickly overthrown and banished from Iran. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi would die a year later in Egypt. In order to consolidate power as quickly as possible and impose Khomeini's ideology as absolute, the leftists who revolted alongside the religious faction were executed, enforcement of hijab was implemented, and no other religion besides Islam was allowed to be practiced.

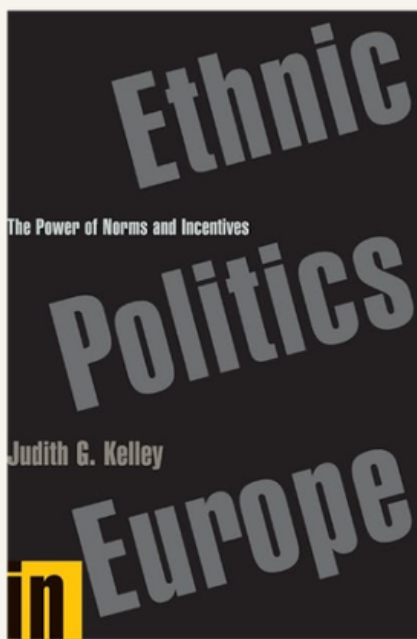
Instead of liberation, the Iranian people traded a dictatorial monarchy for a dictatorial theocracy. The Islamic Republic was born. Not long after the Islamic Republic's inception, the IRGC, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard



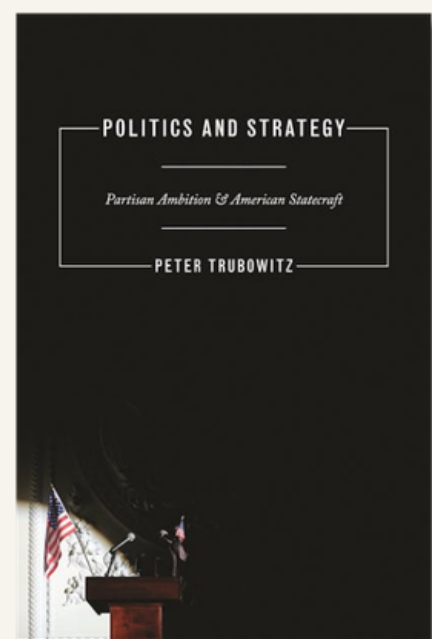
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"*White Backlash* represents a bold and challenging contribution to the study of immigration and its impact on contemporary politics and policymaking. It adds serious and sobering findings to the dialogue on race and ethnic politics, which we can only hope will be ameliorated in time." —Sara Wallace Goodman, *Perspectives on Politics*



"Kelley's analysis is compelling, theoretically innovative, and empirically rich. By exploring not only cases where international institutions have an impact, but also instances where they fail, she shows how the international community has been able to bring about progressive change. This book fills an important gap." —Jeffrey T. Checkel, University of Oslo



"Trubowitz has written an impressive book with a modest thesis. He makes the case that both the distribution of power around the world and domestic politics influence strategic decisions in U.S. foreign policy. . . . Trubowitz captures the complexity of these decisions with theoretical sophistication, an unusual breadth of historical examples, and an impressive clarity of argument. This is an important book." —*Choice*

Corps, was developed. In 1980, the Islamic Republic's power would be tested with Iraq's invasion. Saddam Hussein's thirst for power led him to invade neighboring Iran with the hopes of increasing Iraq's territory to establish Iraq as the Middle Eastern hegemon. The acquisition of Iranian land would also give Iraq access to vast oil reserves that would boost Iraq's economy.

Saddam Hussein invaded soon after the revolution to capitalize on the chaos that resulted from the revolution. He counted on the newly formed Islamic Republic being unable to coordinate an effective attack against the Iraqis due to the downsizing of the military and ousting of military leaders. This strategy proved fateful when the Islamic Republic consolidated its power further as a direct result of the invasion. This attack on its sovereignty created a boom of nationalism and support for the Islamic Republic, which gave the regime further ability to repress political dissenters.

The regime framed this invasion as a "holy war," which also invigorated the people to fight for the regime, which naturally gave those in power legitimacy. Instead of becoming the hegemon, Iraq created a much more formidable neighbor that would become the center of the Middle East. This desire to resist foreign invaders and oppressors was not a new phenomenon for Iranians. Over the millennia, Iranians fought invaders until there was nothing left. Even when the Arabs sought to colonize Iran and convert the people to Islam, they converted to Shiite Islam instead of the majority-practiced Sunni Islam.

If the Iranians were to be colonized and converted, they were going to do it on their terms. This independence and resistance have always been inherent in every Iranian; the Islamic Revolution was no exception. From this desire to resist, the ideology of individual terrorism was born. One could use their own body or resources to inflict terror and violence against the entity deemed the oppressor, and it would be a legitimate form of resistance. The individual would then be classified as a martyr of the cause.

Sacrificing oneself is an honor that should be celebrated and encouraged. Terrorism in this form would lead to the terror factions existing today, such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis—all of which are funded by the Islamic Republic. The terrorism of the regime is not contained within the Middle East. One of the most notable international terror attacks was the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish center, which saw the deaths of 85 people and dozens more injured, committed by Hezbollah at the behest of the Islamic Republic.

Although attacks like these are considered acts of terror under international law, the Islamic Republic views them as legitimate forms of resistance against those deemed enemies of the state—which includes Jews, Israelis, or any country in the West. This is one of the main reasons the regime is such a strong threat to any Western democracy; their ruling ideology is the death of our civilization and the imposition of theirs. When applying the regime to any modern conflict, this context must be included.

The Islamic Republic is not unlike monarchies where the head of state is separate from the elected institutions that run the nation. The Islamic Republic has its head of state in the form of the Supreme Leader whose guidance dictates the direction of the country's foreign and nuclear policy

while also being the spiritual epicenter. The Supreme Leader is supported by the Guardian Council, which is comprised of six clerics and six legal scholars. The President is over the implementation of the constitution. However, the elections to choose the President are corrupt and fixed.



IRANIAN-MADE ZOLFAGHAR MISSILES ARE DISPLAYED AT AZADI SQUARE IN TEHRAN ON JULY 24, 2026. IRAN'S ARMY SAID ON JULY 24 THAT IT CARRIED OUT DRONE STRIKES AGAINST SEVERAL AMERICAN MILITARY FACILITIES AND BASES IN SAUDI ARABIA AND JORDAN IN RETALIATION FOR THE LATEST U.S. ATTACKS AGAINST THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC. (PHOTO BY AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Voter turnout is often forced, and the opponents of the government's choice are simply for show. Although the President has power over the economy and day-to-day decisions, national security issues fall back onto the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader is the core of the governing bodies of the regime. He dictates ideology, anchors institutions, commands the armed forces, and heads the judiciary. The regime is beholden to him; the people look to him for religious guidance; and the West sees him as the center of terrorism in the Middle East.

The power held by the Supreme Leader is absolute, but the regime can survive in the absence of leadership, as evidenced by the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei and the mysterious ascension of his hardliner son, Mojtaba Khamenei. In order to understand the success and longevity of the Islamic Republic, the enforcement entity must be discussed. The IRGC began as a force created by Ayatollah Khomeini to gather all the scattered militias in order to create one large military force.

Post-revolution, the IRGC was the primary military authority used to safeguard the fledgling regime and ensure its success. The IRGC's might was then immediately tested with the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. It evolved from a simple intermediary militia group to a strong, battle-hardened cornerstone of the regime. Today, the IRGC answers directly to the Supreme Leader. The domestic paramilitary branch, the Basij, is used to impose the regime's strict rules on the populace. The morality police are often seen kidnapping women off the street who do not follow the mandatory hijab policy.

It is the Basij that came to the streets during the January 2026 protests, supported by Iraqi militias funded by the regime, and murdered upwards of forty thousand protesters who rose up against their repressive government. The IRGC is not the only factor that has contributed to the regime's entrenchment in Iranian society; international sanctions on the economy have also been instrumental. With economic sanctions imposed largely by the United States, the Islamic Republic's economy has been extensively contained

to a small number of countries friendly to the regime based on mutual hatred for the United States.

In practice, although Iran has vast amounts of oil reserves, which should make the nation one of wealth and abundance, the only nations that can purchase oil are mainly China and Russia. The economic sanctions that limit these resources, as well as trade, compounded with severe ideological hardlines, have greatly limited potential allies. The outcome is an isolated populace that has no outlet other than the regime, which seeks to repress them. Consequently, it also further entrenches the regime in Iran's institutions and maintains the strength of its influence on its terror proxies abroad.

How has the war with Iran affected the regime and the people suffering under it? Like other authoritarian regimes, the Islamic Republic uses external attacks as a rallying cry for support and proof that the West is truly an enemy that can never be trusted. The consequences have led to believers becoming further radicalized in their support for the regime, leading to their willingness to enact violence against dissent. Any of the regime's members lost during the United States' and Israel's bombing campaign were deemed martyrs who died defending their nation against "the Great Satans." During the war, with increased military mobilization, the masses who were bravely protesting were forced to retreat under threat of execution. The majority of Iranians who do not support the regime and wish to live under a democratic system fervently hoped that the war would lead to regime change and Trump would be their liberator.

Alas, the Trump administration had no intention of supporting regime change or any concrete goals for the war to achieve. In the end, both the Iranian and American people were given unforgivable results that left them worse off than prior to hostilities. The Iranian regime has used this disappointing outcome as a propaganda opportunity to frame the United States as weak and the Islamic Republic as the beacon of resistance against the West. The regime has relentlessly posted across different platforms how they have humiliated the great American war machine and proven our gusto was only a bluff. The regime's ability to negotiate their asks and receive large concessions from the United States only legitimizes their authority. This has also sealed their position as the great power of the Middle East, in direct competition with the United States' allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The IRGC of the revolution and the IRGC of today are two different entities. However, the plan was always to have the IRGC evolve into the repressive body whose tendrils have invaded every part of Iranian life. The IRGC's influence over politics, security, and the economy is absolute. There is no

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room for dissent, for factions, for differing ideologies, or something so simple as expression of self. This has been a cornerstone of the Islamic Republic since its inception and has been enforced by the IRGC ever since. The IRGC has immense influence over the politics of the nation, as many veterans of the institution have taken positions in the parliament, cabinet, and provincial political positions. This ensures their power is never questioned and the desires of the Supreme Leader are always supported by the government. Although elections are held, the IRGC is suspected of interfering with them to fix their outcomes. On the security front, the IRGC works in conjunction with the military and must have parallel branches to it in order to operate efficiently. This includes a paramilitary force, air force, navy, and ground forces.

The IRGC also aids the military with espionage, distributing propaganda, and cybercrimes. The economy also plays a vital role in the IRGC as well as the structure of the governing bodies. The Islamic Republic is riddled with corruption that aims to deplete the wealth of the people and distribute it to the ruling class. This is most evident in the steadily decreasing value of the rial. One U.S. dollar is equal to 42,000 rials. Although the populace must suffer with their money equaling close to nothing, the Supreme Leader has a net worth estimated at around 150 billion dollars due to the strict control over Iran's resources.

Not only is this wealth extraction endemic to the government, but the corruption also extends to the IRGC. The IRGC originally was not involved with the economy, but this changed when it was tasked with rebuilding the infrastructure damaged during the Iran-Iraq War. From there, its involvement in vital industries, such as shipping and banking, grew larger. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, companies affiliated with the IRGC are awarded business contracts from the state, which allows it to build infrastructure and oversee the oil sector.

The financial benefits the IRGC receives do not only come from official businesses but also from the black market. The black market allows sanctions to be bypassed and money to be funneled directly to the IRGC instead of the government and populace. The money incurred from all of its financial operations funds its acquisition of weaponry and the nuclear program. The pervasiveness of the IRGC only intensifies in times of hostilities and outright war. Protests and anti-government sentiment are likely to grow during these times, and people are prone to be more outspoken or act against their oppressors.

In order to maintain its hold over power, the Islamic Republic cannot allow any weakened state to inspire citizens' hope for freedom and democracy. The best means of repression in times of hostilities are increased surveillance and censorship. Many examples of the increased surveillance exist but can most easily be understood in the growing number of morality police that line the streets looking for anyone, especially women, violating the law. The internet shutdown, which lasted for months, is another glaring example of the strength of the surveillance state.

The internet shutdown was implemented to prevent the outside world from documenting or bearing witness to the crimes against humanity committed

by the regime. After the protests in January, the Basij greatly increased the number of checkpoints throughout the nation to intimidate the populace against protests or voicing dissent. The Supreme Leader and IRGC use the excuse of possible national security threats or foreign espionage during wartime to increase these surveillance tactics. Unfortunately, many Iranian civilians have been executed under the charge of “spying for Israel.” These charges likely have no merit, and the accused have no way to dispel suspicion.

Those who are executed are usually those who have participated in protests previously or have voiced dissent against the government. Wartime gives the government an outlet to rid dissidents from the population. With the recent Iran War conducted by the United States and Israel, the Islamic Republic did just this. People are more terrified of voicing their dissent due to increased surveillance and patrolling by the Basij. News of increased executions also dissuades society from revolting. The surveillance state imposed by the Islamic Republic leads to either imprisonment or execution for those seeking freedom.

During the Iran War, the United States and Israel targeted many high-ranking people within the government of Iran and the IRGC. While Israel was hoping to initiate regime change, the Trump administration had no such goals. One of the strike campaigns was targeting the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. As stated previously, that strike was successful, and he was assassinated. What followed was the question as to who would take his place. The conflict continued to rage as those with the constitutional authority to select a successor discussed their options.

The composition of the Islamic Republic’s government and institutions, as I have explained, has embedded itself so deeply throughout the nation that this instant loss of leadership did not lead to chaos. During the absence of a Supreme Leader, the National Security Council took on the role of leader of the regime during the war. Other leadership positions that were vacated as a result of assassinations were quickly filled with IRGC hardliners, leading to little fragmentation of government. Eventually, Khamenei’s second-eldest son—Mojtaba Khamenei—was appointed the new Supreme Leader.

He was not the only candidate, however. Before Khamenei’s demise, he chose three clerics as possible successors. Mojtaba was not nominated without concerns. These concerns included his lack of administrative experience, his theological qualifications, and the optics of a possible nepotistic leadership lineage. Although this transition was smooth and followed constitutional processes, this was not the only likely succession scenario. Scholars determined there to be three possible succession scenarios: constitutional, IRGC coup, or complete regime collapse.

Alas, the best option for the Islamic Republic and the worst option for the West is what occurred. Scholars also debate what a post-Khamenei regime will look like. Without much knowledge of Mojtaba, it has been rumored that his ideological stances are more rigid and oppressive than his father’s. It is possible that the West now has a less-friendly negotiator, a more extremist threat, and a more militarized society than it did before the war. This has yet to be determined. Due to Mojtaba’s unprecedented lack of public appearances and communications being published through a proxy, he remains an unsettling question with no answer in sight.



A GROUP OF VEILED IRANIAN SCHOOLGIRLS PERFORM BENEATH A PORTRAIT OF IRAN'S LATE SUPREME LEADER, AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI, AND BESIDE A PORTRAIT OF SUPREME LEADER AYATOLLAH MOJTABA KHAMENEI, DURING A RELIGIOUS RALLY MARKING ARBAEEN, IN THE HOLY MONTH OF MUHARRAM, IN SOUTHERN TEHRAN, IRAN, ON AUGUST 4, 2026, AMID TENSIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND THE U.S. (PHOTO BY MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES)

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The failure of the "collapse assumption" manifested in the consequences of the Iran War—the regime was more entrenched and militarized than before. The Trump administration's choices of leadership over the Department of Defense and its subsequent decisions on personnel directly led to the failure of the war. The Secretary of Defense fired experienced, knowledgeable, and capable leadership over their refusals to employ catastrophic strategic plans. This led to the appointment of military officers that were loyal to Trump rather than loyal to the rules of engagement. Choices made by humans, such as targeted drone strikes, were replaced by AI.

Information brought to leadership about outdated intelligence was ignored, and children died as a result. This outright incompetence mixed with ignorance of the capabilities and structure of the regime led to a complete American humiliation. On the other side, Netanyahu's hunger for war and enemy elimination blinded him to the reality that airstrikes are not sufficient to bring the regime to its knees. Both administrations failed to understand the most important factor in any authoritarian regime—never cede power.

No matter what the United States and Israel threw at the Islamic Republic, it would not have been enough. Resilience in the face of adversity has been a characteristic of Iranian culture for millennia; the regime is no exception. A successful war against the regime that results in regime change would have to attack on all fronts and be prepared for years of intense conflict. This is in part due to the nature of the regime. The Islamic Republic is an ideological state. One cannot simply airstrike an idea. The very essence of the ideology must be rooted out through support from the citizens, prosecution of the oppressors, and education to prevent it from taking root in the future.

A few states parallel the Islamic Republic throughout recent history: Cuba, North Korea, and Iraq. Despite being sanctioned by the United States and all nations having been on the receiving end of U.S. military action, extremist ideologies still pervade. Cuba is still a Communist nation under a dictatorship despite the ground invasion by the United States with the goal of regime change. All three nations prove that ideology is not so easily erased. Ideology must be accounted for in military operations and strategic goals, especially in the Middle East.

Although these regimes have proven their durability against obstacles and military intervention, that does not mean they are legitimate. Any regime that routinely violates human rights, provides no fair judiciary, rigs elections, and, in the case of the Islamic Republic, routinely funds foreign terrorist groups that target civilians is not legitimate. What is an unfortunate occurrence in the international sphere is that institutions like the United Nations give legitimacy to the regime. In recent years, the Islamic Republic was nominated to the Committee for Programme and Coordination at the U.N., which is responsible for shaping policy on women's rights, human rights, and terrorism prevention.

How could the U.N., a peacemaking body, nominate the Islamic Republic for such a position while actively monitoring the daily human rights violations in numerous sectors across the nation, as well as having sufficient evidence to prove the regime's financial ties to terrorist groups? The U.N. cannot continue giving legitimacy to this oppressive regime. If it does, it would not be far-fetched to call into question the purpose the U.N. has for routinely including dictatorships on human rights commissions.

The Islamic Republic's pattern of aggression is not solely based on a desire to eradicate its enemies. The philosophy of aggression was born out of its experiences in the Iran-Iraq War. At the beginning of the war, the Islamic Republic tried to end hostilities through diplomacy. This effort was fruitless, and the war continued for eight years with thousands of casualties. Due to the failure of diplomatic efforts, the Islamic Republic came to believe that its restraint was viewed as a weakness to be exploited by its enemies.

This has directly informed its national security strategy for decades. Another aspect of its national security strategy is to remove the possibility of war reaching Iranian soil. From this, its terror proxy network was born. Through this network, the regime is able to directly attack its enemies while also avoiding responsibility. However, if an enemy were to attack directly within Iran's territory, the regime would respond directly. This can be seen in the recent Iran War, where the regime repeatedly attacked both Israeli territory and U.S. bases located in neighboring countries.

It is quite possible that the escalation of targeting neighboring sovereign nations is not an irrational tactic by the regime but a tool of survival. These attacks project strength and willingness of the regime to protect its territory as well as its assets. The escalation and ability to combat enemy attacks prove to the international community that the Islamic Republic is formidable and has the capacity to protect its interests against the military might of both the United States and Israel. Now that the international community understands the military might of the regime, their standing as a regional power has

shifted to be on par with Saudi Arabia. The war not only transitioned the Islamic Republic's standing in the region but also greatly damaged the United States' soft and hard power. With the United States' air strike campaign against the regime leading to absolute failure, the U.S. is now viewed as weaker and less able to achieve its military goals, while the opposite is true for the regime. Another unfortunate consequence of the Iran War is that it has given the regime battle experience.

Their capabilities and governing structure have been tested with minimal lasting damage. The war also forced the regime to become a more risk-tolerant actor. The dangers of this have been proven in the regime's willingness to bring the entire region into hostilities rather than having a localized conflict. Now, every Gulf state must view the Islamic Republic as a possible enemy that will attack civilian infrastructure as well as any resources of the United States within the nation. The Gulf states must respond to this regional hostility brought by the Islamic Republic by forming a strong coalition with the United States against the regime. In order to prevent the region from falling into chaos and ideological extremism, the Islamic Republic must be the common enemy of the Gulf states. To reduce the enemy's capabilities and prove their willingness to protect their sovereignty, the Gulf states should join the United States in any future campaigns against the regime.

The impetus for the Iran War was the likelihood that the Islamic Republic was at the precipice of developing a nuclear weapon. Tel Aviv convinced Washington that the regime was a few weeks to a few days away from the completion of a nuclear weapon. To remove that threat, immediate military action against the regime's nuclear sites and weapons capabilities was necessary. However, proof of these weapons is contested. If the Islamic Republic were to develop nuclear weapons capabilities, the consequences for any enemy would be catastrophic.

With the current regime in power, the likelihood of using a nuclear warhead outweighs the possibility of the weapon not being used due to the philosophy of aggression mentioned previously. For the sake of peace and the preservation of human life, this war should lend credibility to working towards nuclear deterrence. The reality is that nuclear weapons are apocalyptic-level weapons that do not discriminate between legitimate military targets, civilians, or defenseless wildlife. As humanity evolves, a question among the global superpowers must be reasoned: should we disarm our nuclear stockpiles?

The only answer for a safer future is yes, but all countries must agree. Discussion and diplomacy are the only ways to work towards a nuclear-weapon-free future. Military action cannot erase nuclear knowledge or the incentives within a governing body to develop a nuclear weapon. Military action will only postpone weapon development, as the ruling philosophy of nuclear weapons procurement still exists. The philosophy must change for the output to change. In regard to dismantling the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, there are two options: diplomacy and coercion.

In the past, the United States has used diplomacy to enter into an agreement that halts all nuclear development. In 2015, President Obama

negotiated the JCPOA, which reduced the Islamic Republic's stockpile of enriched uranium and removed two centrifuges that develop the uranium for military use. This gave the regime enough uranium to power energy infrastructure but not to develop weapons. It also gave the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) oversight of the regime's nuclear program to ensure compliance.

This ended when the Trump administration removed the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 in order to impose economic sanctions. Between the two administrations, the policy towards the regime's nuclear program switched from diplomacy to coercion. Scholars debate which of the two is more effective in preventing nuclear weapon development. Based on historical events, diplomacy has been the most effective way of containing the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. However, appeasement has also been proven to be an ineffective tool used against authoritarian leadership. In the long term, the only way to prevent the Islamic Republic from developing a nuclear weapon is for the regime to collapse and for a democratic system to take its place. A democratic system of government is more likely to enter into nuclear deterrence agreements and develop nuclear energy infrastructure to benefit its citizens.

Another alteration of the Islamic Republic due to the Iran War is the increased repression of expressions of dissent. The protest in January that prompted the regime to murder tens of thousands of its citizens has increased the terror in the hearts of the populace. However, there have been isolated protests both during and after hostilities broke out. This proves that although the flame of revolution has dwindled, it has not been extinguished. History also proves that the people, the true Iranians, will continue to revolt until they are free of their oppressors.

Despite the violence being levied against the people, their desire for freedom outweighs the regime's need for power retention. Besides increased repression, a more hardened Iran also has repercussions for the entire region. As discussed previously, a more hardened regime is a more aggressive regime. This would lead to any Gulf state not ideologically aligned with the regime becoming a potential target. Any happenings the regime perceives to be an attack against its sovereignty or interests could cause unpredictable escalation patterns across the region.

The attacks would not come solely from inside the borders of Iran but also from its proxies. Due to the locations of Iran's proxies throughout the region, the entire region is within striking distance. As we have seen in the Iran War, the new technology of autonomous drones is the future of warfare. These drones are cheap to

produce, hard to defend against, and cause significant damage. If the regime wanted, the entire region could become a fiery battlefield based in urban areas. The security the United States promised to multiple Gulf states in return for allowing American military bases on their soil has disappeared.

The IRGC that emerges from this conflict will be more entrenched and more ideologically rigid.

Therefore, the relationship between these nations and the United States is uncertain. Any removal of American interests in the region would be an immense blow to American forward positioning and influence. It would also prove that the United States' capabilities are not what they seem. American soft power would be decimated. The consequences of the Trump administration's strategic overreach and decision to go to war with Iran have had devastating effects on multiple levels. Deterrence that had managed the ideologically aggressive regime has now been replaced by regional instability due to the war.

All of this begs the question, "Can modern authoritarian systems survive indefinitely through crisis management?" Crisis management can and will certainly provide longevity to an authoritarian state. However, managing external crises and internal crises are different. Internal crises show a crack in leadership and its effectiveness. In the case of the Islamic Republic, the regime cannot manage internal strife through the continuous slaughter of innocents and sanctioned executions. It is only a matter of time before the people are successful in toppling the regime and instating a democratic government.

Due to the regime's current policy of repression of dissent and its military success against the United States, the Islamic Republic has become an example to other authoritarian states. Other authoritarian states like North Korea, Venezuela, and Afghanistan can see what is possible for their policies when tested. This is another unintended consequence of the Iran War that was entirely preventable. Other authoritarian states are going to be more emboldened to enact violent tactics against their own people and feel empowered in any future conflicts against democratic states.

The Iran War has left a lasting scar on both the American idea of war in the Middle East and the relationships the United States has cultivated. The United States has not faced an enemy like the IRGC in its long military history. Although it has faced similar adversaries, like the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, neither of those terrorist entities can compare to the IRGC. What makes the IRGC so unique is both its foresight and organization. From its inception in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution, the IRGC, and the Islamic Republic as a whole, have been preparing for war with the United States.

Due to its importance in the region, vast resources, and international terror campaigns, the Islamic Republic knew it would become a military target in the future. Based on the threat of nuclear capabilities, the Israeli government has been lobbying the United States to take military action against the Islamic Republic for more than a decade. Trump was the leader who believed the Islamic Republic posed enough of a threat to act. However, the Trump administration lacks military leadership with enough understanding of the unique power that is the IRGC and capable tacticians to accomplish its military goals.

A more competent and experienced administration may have been successful in achieving meaningful change and the destruction of uranium stockpiles, but those are not the cards we have been dealt. The Trump administration naively believed that bombing the Islamic Republic repeatedly would induce enough terror to coerce surrender. Surrender has never been an option for Iranians in their multi-millennia history. The only possibility of

surrender or concession would have been through a sustained ground invasion that controlled Kharg Island, the Strait of Hormuz, and Tehran.

However, to accomplish this, tens of thousands of Americans would die, and our armaments would be depleted. This is due to the extreme entrenchment of the IRGC in Iranian society. Not only does the IRGC exist as an enforcement entity, but it also exists as the ruling power, the local law enforcement in the form of the Basij, and in Iran's institutions. Simply, the IRGC is everywhere. The removal of top leadership does not threaten the existence of the IRGC, as there is always someone to replace them.

Consequently, succinct military pressure that does not exist on all surfaces or arm the populace will not result in regime change but the opposite. A consequence of the United States and Israel's military campaign against the Islamic Republic proves that a war without a ground invasion or an armed populace will not liberate Iran from its oppressors but rather embolden the IRGC to strengthen its hold on Iran. The IRGC that emerges from this conflict will be more entrenched and more ideologically rigid. This war has proven that the IRGC and the regime can withstand extended external attacks and survive. Now, the regime is more militarized and will be harder to topple. It also means the influence of the regime within the region has now increased and will be more of a threat in the future.

This threat is made possible by its transformation from a state that is only confrontational through proxies to now being direct in its hostilities. The regime now understands that in order to survive, confrontation is necessary, and diplomacy gives way to weakness. The Islamic Republic has been remade through the Iran War. The United States must reevaluate its future responses to the regime and how best to support the Iranian people. The future of the region is now unstable, and the United States' relationships are uncertain. Overall, the war with Iran has led to mass casualties, dead Americans, American assets in the Gulf being destroyed, relationships with the Gulf states coming into question, and a more hardened, militarized, and emboldened regime. Any action taken against the regime must be taken with these truths in mind.



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