

What is the end-game in the US-Iran-Israel war?

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Wars rarely begin with clarity. But they become dangerous when they continue without it.

The latest escalation between the United States, Israel, and Iran has already crossed the threshold from tactical confrontation to strategic inflection point. Precision strikes, missile retaliation, proxy mobilisation, and open-ended warnings from Washington have reshaped the regional security environment in a matter of days. Yet beneath the spectacle of airpower and retaliation lies a question that grows more urgent with every passing hour: what does victory mean for the United States in Iran?

When a defined political end state is absent, even successful military operations can drift into prolonged conflict. And, in geopolitics, drift is rarely neutral. It is costly.

In the past 48 hours, US officials have offered varying explanations for the decision to escalate. One justification frames the strikes as pre-emptive – necessary to neutralise Iranian capabilities before they endanger US forces. Another suggests the United States acted to shape the battlefield because an Israeli strike was inevitable and Iranian retaliation would have targeted American bases regardless.

These are not semantic differences. A pre-emptive war is justified by imminence. A protective escalation is justified by alliance management. A transformative campaign – implied in some of the more forceful rhetoric – seeks to permanently degrade an adversary's strategic capacity.

Each rationale carries a different timeline, a different threshold for success, and a different tolerance for risk.

If the objective was to prevent a specific imminent attack, then the benchmark for success is finite. If the goal is to reset regional deterrence architecture, the horizon expands. If the ambition extends toward reshaping Iran's strategic posture altogether, then the United States is entering far more uncertain terrain.

When political objectives blur, military operations multiply.

Iran does not conceptualise war through symmetrical confrontation. Its defence architecture is structured for survival under sustained attack. Decentralised command networks, dispersed launch platforms, layered proxy relationships, and redundant

supply chains form a strategic mosaic designed to prevent catastrophic collapse from concentrated strikes.

Iran's approach transforms the battlefield into a test of resilience rather than dominance. Even if missile inventories are degraded and naval assets targeted, Iran retains alternative channels for retaliation. Proxy actors can escalate indirectly. Cyber and asymmetric maritime tactics remain available. Regional militias can act with varying degrees of autonomy.

Attrition, therefore, becomes ambiguous. What appears as battlefield success may not translate into strategic submission. Iran's objective is not necessarily victory in conventional terms, but endurance

if supply chains tighten or political constraints emerge in Washington.

The imbalance between cheap offensive systems and expensive defensive interceptors is a structural vulnerability. It favours endurance over decisive knockout blows. Iran does not need to achieve battlefield dominance; it only needs to impose persistent costs.

On the other hand, speculation about renewed US coordination with Kurdish elements along Iran's western frontier introduces an additional layer of complexity to an already fragmented battlespace. Historically, Kurdish groups have served as tactical partners in counter-extremism campaigns, valued for their local knowledge and operational discipline. In theory,

Tehran's most enduring strategic advantage lies in its distributed proxy architecture – Hezbollah in Lebanon, militias in Iraq and Syria, and aligned actors in Yemen. Together, they form a calibrated escalation ladder that allows Iran to impose costs without committing to full conventional confrontation. These actors do not require constant direction from Tehran to generate instability; their very existence complicates de-escalation.

The consequence is structural. Even if direct US-Iran exchanges stabilise, secondary theatres remain capable of reigniting hostilities. Missile launches, maritime harassment, drone strikes, and limited cross-border engagements create sustained friction while staying below the threshold of total war. Punishing one node does not collapse the network. It merely shifts pressure to another front.

Peripheral escalation, in other words, rarely remains peripheral. Once multiple semi-autonomous actors are engaged across overlapping theatres, containment becomes exponentially more difficult. The battlefield expands horizontally, while strategic clarity contracts.

Now the question is: could boots on the ground follow? Thus far, Washington has avoided committing to a ground invasion scenario. However, senior officials have conspicuously declined to rule it out. That ambiguity serves as a deterrent but also leaves open the possibility of mission creep.

Ground deployment would fundamentally transform the conflict. Securing hardened facilities, ensuring regime compliance, or stabilising post-strike environments could require physical presence. Yet history demonstrates that once boots touch the ground, strategic horizons expand unpredictably.

If such a decision were made, coordination with Israel would be indispensable. Israeli intelligence integration, aerial support, and operational planning would likely be central. At the same time, overt Israeli participation inside Iranian territory would heighten regional symbolism, potentially consolidating domestic Iranian support around resistance narratives.

The threshold for ground war is therefore not purely military – it is political, symbolic, and generational.

On the economic front, while disruptions around the Strait of

Hormuz have understandably drawn global attention, they are symptoms rather than the core issue. Energy markets respond to risk perception as much as physical obstruction. Even limited threats generate price volatility and strategic anxiety among energy-importing economies.

The broader geopolitical consequence is prolonged instability, which affects alliance cohesion, defence planning cycles, and great-power competition. Asian economies dependent on Gulf energy flows recalibrate risk assessments. European partners confront inflationary pressures. Regional states accelerate defence procurement.

The ripple effects extend far beyond the Gulf.

Ultimately, the strategic ambiguity surrounding America's objectives remains the central dilemma. Is the aim to restore deterrence? Permanently degrade missile capability? Collapse Iran's proxy system? Force regime behavioural change? Or create conditions for internal political transformation?

Each objective requires different timelines, tools, and risk tolerances. Pursuing all simultaneously invites strategic overextension.

Wars become protracted not simply because adversaries are strong, but because political aims are imprecise. Iran's strategy is built for endurance. Israel's for decisive deterrence. The US appears suspended between preemption, containment, and coercive transformation. If Washington does not define a coherent political end goal, the conflict risks evolving into a long war of attrition in which success is measured not by decisive outcome but by relative exhaustion. The most powerful military in the world can degrade infrastructure and suppress adversaries. But without strategic clarity, even overwhelming force cannot guarantee strategic resolution. Without strategy and discipline, what began as a limited confrontation may harden into a defining geopolitical contest whose consequences reshape the Middle East – and US global leadership – for years to come.

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The strategic ambiguity surrounding the US' objectives remains the central dilemma. PHOTO: AFP

long enough to outlast adversary cohesion.

A prolonged campaign would transform the war into a contest of stamina. And in wars of attrition, material sustainability often matters more than initial shock. This raises an uncomfortable reality for Washington and its partners. Gulf states operate sophisticated, layered air defence systems designed to intercept ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. Yet even advanced systems rely on finite interceptor stockpiles. Sustained barrages of relatively inexpensive drones and missiles can gradually deplete costly, slow-to-replenish defensive inventories. If the conflict drags on for months, Gulf capitals could face difficult calculations about allocation and resupply, particularly

activating this axis could stretch Tehran's internal security apparatus, forcing Iran to divert resources inward amid external pressure.

But strategy does not operate in isolation. Any expanded Kurdish role immediately intersects with Turkey's acute sensitivities regarding Kurdish militarisation. Escalating along this frontier risks generating friction within NATO at precisely the moment alliance cohesion is critical. Moreover, empowering sub-state actors is never a purely tactical decision. Political aspirations evolve. Local agendas diverge. Instruments of pressure can transform into autonomous actors whose objectives are misaligned with their original sponsors. This dynamic mirrors Iran's own approach to regional power projection.

The Middle East is now in a struggle for a new regional order

YOUSEF SY RAMADAN

It is no longer possible to treat what is happening in the Middle East as a passing round of escalation or simply another war added to the region's long record of conflict. Today's confrontation has crossed red lines that have existed for decades and has opened the door to the possibility of restructuring the entire region, not just adjusting the balance of power within it.

It is a rare moment in the region's history, where not only the capabilities of armies are being tested, but the regional system itself: its foundations, alliances, borders and perhaps even its maps. While capitals are busy calculating the course of the battles, a deeper and more serious question is taking shape: are we witnessing a war that will end with new arrangements, or the beginning of a long period of chaos for which no one holds the keys to an end?

For four decades, the region has lived under what might be described as an unequal balance of deterrence: a sharp conflict between Iran and a US-led axis in which Israel stands as an advanced spearhead, yet this conflict has been governed by an undeclared ceiling that prevented a slide into full direct confrontation. Wars were fought through intermediaries, strikes were carried out with calculation and assassinations occurred in the shadows, because all sides understood that starting a major war meant entering an arena of unpredictable results. Today, with the reality of direct confrontation, that ceiling has collapsed and the deterrence equation that has governed the region since 1979 has come to an end. What we are witnessing is not an escalation within the old system but an exit from it. The conflict has moved from managing tension to attempting to resolve it.

There is an important difference between a war fought to improve the terms of negotiation and a war

undertaken to redefine the rules of the international or regional order. The first can often be contained. The second tends to expand because it addresses existential questions: who sets the rules of the game? Who holds the authority to distribute power? Declaring the goal of regime change places the war in this second category. For Iran, this is not understood merely as a political threat but as a threat to the state itself as it has existed since the revolution. In such circumstances, war becomes a struggle for survival, where escalation shifts from an option to a necessity.

Lessons from Iraq to Libya suggest that overthrowing regimes through external force may be possible, yet it often leaves behind a strategic vacuum that is difficult to fill. Iran, however, is not a fragile state. It is an ancient civilisational state with a deeply rooted identity and a well-established institutional structure. Any attempt to remove it by force from the regional equation could produce wider chaos than the problem it seeks to solve.

Four decades ago, Iran became a central knot within the regional order. It could not be fully integrated into the Washington-led system and it could not be ignored or excluded without pushing the region toward instability. The US relationship has been complex and contained. Even strikes directed at the leadership of the regime, however harsh, do not fundamentally change this reality. The Iranian state is not built around a single individual but around a network of security, military, religious and bureaucratic institutions capable of reproducing leadership.

Iranian history also shows that external threats often strengthen nationalism and reduce internal divisions. Iran additionally relies on a dispersed model of power: long-range missiles, cyber warfare, the ability to threaten navigation and energy routes and the capacity to extend the battlefield beyond its own borders. Any war with it would not be a single battle but a series of interconnected battles across time

and geography.

The traditional military superiority of the US-Israeli alliance is indisputable. Yet recent experience has shown that military superiority does not automatically produce political victory, particularly in wars aimed at reconfiguring entire states. The United States is facing strategic fatigue after two decades of war. It is facing a global economy highly sensitive to disruptions in energy supply and

loses its regional influence. This would also require internal stability in Iran and the construction of an alternative regional system, both of which would be extremely difficult. A second possibility is a multipolar Middle East, if Iran withstands the pressure and remains an influential force, producing a balance of power in which neither side can impose full dominance. A third scenario is extended strategic chaos, which aligns closely with many of the

a period in which the old order is dying while a new one has not yet been born. In such moments, wars and miscalculations tend to multiply because the system that once regulated interactions has collapsed, while an alternative structure has not yet emerged. If the war continues, the region will not return to what it was before. The old rules of engagement have fallen and new rules have not yet been written.



a range of competing international priorities. Israel, despite its qualitative military edge, remains a state with a small territory and population, which makes it vulnerable to prolonged wars of attrition. Tactical military success can turn into a strategic impasse if it is merely supported by Netanyahu's broader vision of war with Iran with no end in sight.

Against this background, the region does not appear to be moving toward a single outcome but toward several possible paths that could shape the Middle East for decades. One path would be a Middle East with a stronger US grip, if Iran retreats sharply and

region's past experiences: no actor is decisively defeated, conflicts persist at lower intensity, the authority of the nation state weakens in certain areas and instability becomes a permanent condition.

In a globalised world, major wars are decided not only on the battlefield but also in energy and financial markets. Disruption of oil supplies or sharp increases in prices could push many international powers to intervene in order to halt escalation, not out of moral motives but to protect vital economic interests.

The Middle East today stands at a historical crossroads that resembles

Will the Middle East become a region dominated by a single power, an arena of multiple balances, or a zone of open chaos? The answer is not yet clear and it may not become clear quickly. What is certain is that if this war continues, it will not only alter the map of influence but reshape the very concepts of security, alliance and power for decades ahead. The Middle East is witnessing more than a war. It is facing a historic test: either the birth of a new order from the heart of conflict or a slide into a prolonged era without a decisive end.

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