



## In Iran, the US has bitten off more than it can chew

Washington, like many times before, projects its own assumptions onto a political culture it only half understands

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FILE PHOTO: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel at a military rally in downtown Tehran, Iran  
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It is still far too early to say with confidence when the present phase of the US-Israeli war against Iran will end. Even a deep familiarity with the region does not solve the problem of uncertainty.

Too many decisive variables lie outside any tidy regional model. Decisions in Washington matter. China's posture matters. The calculations of global financial and political elites matter. The private thresholds of risk among Gulf monarchies matter. No serious analyst

can fold all of that into a neat formula. Yet if one looks at the visible trajectory of the last two days, and if no strategic shock overturns the pattern, the most plausible expectation is that this acute phase will continue for roughly another ten days, perhaps somewhat longer. That would be the most disciplined reading of momentum.

What matters first is to reject the lazy language of victory and defeat. Iran has neither won nor lost in any final sense. What we are witnessing is not an isolated war with a clean beginning and a clean end, but another violent chapter in the broader confrontation that entered a new active phase on October 7, 2023. Since then, Israel has tried to suppress Tehran strategically, to push it back, fracture its deterrent, and, if possible, force a historic reversal in the regional balance of power. But that ambition remains unfulfilled. The war continues because the political organism of Iran has proved far more resilient than many in Washington and West Jerusalem expected.

That resilience is regularly misunderstood in the West because Iran is too often read through categories that flatter outside observers rather than explain Iranian reality. Analysts who search only for economics, elite bargains, social frustration, corruption, sanctions fatigue, or technological backwardness are studying the outer skin of the state while missing its inner architecture. Iran is not sustained by ideology alone, nor by economic performance, nor by the self-interest of its elites. At its deepest level, the Islamic Republic rests upon a much older reservoir of legitimacy, memory, ritual, and sacred history. The modern state in Iran draws energy from a civilizational depth that predates the republic itself and, in important ways, even exceeds it.

This is where Shiism becomes indispensable to any serious understanding of Iranian politics. In many Western discussions, Shiism is treated as a theological label or a merely symbolic element in state discourse. In reality, it is one of the central frameworks through which power, sacrifice, justice, injury, patience, betrayal, and redemption are interpreted in Iran. Shiite political imagination is steeped in the memory of Karbala, in the moral tension between oppression and resistance, in the sanctification of endurance under duress, and in the belief that worldly defeat can conceal spiritual or historical vindication. All this is part of the cultural grammar through which crisis is translated into social meaning.

That matters enormously in wartime. A polity shaped by such a tradition does not respond to pressure in the same way as a state whose legitimacy depends primarily on prosperity or procedural consensus. External assault does not automatically dissolve cohesion. Very

often it does the opposite. It turns domestic anger outward. It narrows the space for ambiguity. It delegitimizes compromise. It empowers the camp that speaks in the language of duty, continuity, and resistance. In that sense, the American and Israeli campaign has not simply struck Iranian military targets. It has activated precisely those social and spiritual reflexes that strengthen the hardest layers of the system.

This is why the assumption of imminent internal collapse now looks increasingly shallow. Yes, Iran has corruption. Yes, it has economic pain, generational frustration, institutional rigidity, and deep internal grievances. But these are not unique pathologies, and they do not automatically convert into a willingness to welcome foreign coercion. Much of the region lives with inflation, inequality, patronage, and elite insulation. One hears similar complaints across the Gulf about prices, salaries, and the cost of ordinary life. These frustrations are real, but they coexist with a political culture in which external threat can trigger an almost instantaneous consolidation around the state. Iran demonstrated exactly that during the Iran-Iraq war, when a society marked by revolution, factionalism, and disorder nonetheless rallied with astonishing speed in the face of invasion. The same civilizational reflex is visible again today.

For that reason, the emergence of a harder and more pragmatic young leader backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, important clerical networks, and the military establishment should not be viewed as an accident of succession. It is the predictable political result of war. The election of Mojtaba Khamenei, however controversial it may have been in some circles since 2020, proceeded without the kind of open resistance many outside observers had long anticipated. War narrowed the field. External pressure purified the political environment in favor of continuity and discipline. Even critics of dynastic drift were forced into silence or tactical retreat because foreign attack changed the hierarchy of priorities. In wartime, the state's defenders do not need to persuade everyone. They need only convince enough of society that survival comes before argument. Current reporting indicates that Mojtaba Khamenei's elevation has indeed strengthened the hardline center of gravity in Tehran, even as reactions inside Iran remain mixed and more complex than official imagery suggests.

This is one of the great recurring American miscalculations in the Middle East. Washington repeatedly projects its own assumptions onto political cultures it only half understands. It overestimates the universality of liberal-material incentives and underestimates the force of memory, faith, humiliation, and sovereign pride. It imagines that pressure will divide when in fact pressure often fuses. It imagines that decapitation will paralyze when in fact

decapitation can radicalize succession. It imagines that fear will produce compliance when fear, filtered through a sacralized narrative of resistance, can produce defiance instead. The result is a familiar pattern in which military superiority generates tactical success while political ignorance corrodes strategic outcomes.

The same blindness helps explain why the current campaign has not produced the diplomatic atmosphere Washington may have hoped for. On the contrary, the present round of war has increased sympathy for Iran in substantial parts of the world. One does not need to romanticize Tehran to see this. In Europe and across the wider Global South, many observers do not read the conflict as a tidy morality play about nonproliferation or counterterrorism. They see a major power and its regional ally using overwhelming force to preserve an unequal order. On Western streets, disgust with American and Israeli conduct has intensified rather than receded. That reaction is not the same thing as approval of Iran's system, and it would be foolish to confuse the two. But political sympathy in international crises is rarely awarded to the actor with the cleaner ideology. It is often awarded to the actor perceived to be under assault.

This mood is sharpened by a second development. Many people in the West increasingly notice disturbing affinities between certain forms of Iranian fundamentalism and the messianic nationalism of the Israeli far right. That comparison is politically explosive, but it has entered public discourse nonetheless. It is one reason the moral monopoly once enjoyed by Israel in large sections of Western debate has eroded so visibly. At the same time, anti-Semitism is rising in ugly and dangerous ways, even as many Jews openly condemn the course set by West Jerusalem. Propaganda flattens these distinctions. It erases the difference between criticism of a state and hatred of a people. It makes serious thought more difficult precisely when serious thought is most needed.

Europe's rift with Washington is therefore real, even if it remains uneven and hesitant. The continent is not speaking with one voice, and official caution should not be mistaken for enthusiasm. But recent commentary and reporting show clearly that many European governments were either sidelined or deeply uneasy about the scale and direction of the US-Israeli campaign. Public opposition in several European countries has also been significant. The mood is not one of wholehearted Atlantic unity. It is one of discomfort, fragmentation, and fear of strategic drift. The transatlantic alliance was already strained by trade disputes, political mistrust, and diverging security instincts. This war threatens to widen those fractures rather than heal them. Spain has emerged as one of the sharpest critics, while broader European commentary has warned that the US is behaving with the

same strategic carelessness that once led the West into the disasters of Iraq and beyond.

Relations with Türkiye, too, are far from smooth. Even when Ankara remains wary of Tehran, it does not automatically align with Washington's maximalist instincts. Turkish calculations are anchored in sovereignty, border stability, domestic security, Kurdish dynamics, and the management of regional prestige. Recent reporting points to sharp tensions after Iranian military activity spilled toward Turkish airspace, while the broader climate remains one of suspicion rather than harmony. Donald Trump may still imagine that pressure can compel alignment, but the region no longer responds to American commands with the deference that once seemed routine.

Perhaps nowhere has the psychological effect of this war been more revealing than in the Gulf. For years, many local elites lived with the comforting fiction that the American security umbrella was both permanent and sufficient. That illusion is fading. The lesson drawn in the Gulf is not simply that Iran is dangerous. It is that US guarantees are conditional, limited, and subject to sudden escalation that others may be forced to absorb. States that once believed proximity to Washington guaranteed safety are now compelled to think much more seriously about self-defense, strategic redundancy, and the possibility of abandonment. Just as important, the aura of unquestioned American military supremacy has taken a blow. US power remains formidable, but the myth of effortless domination has become harder to sustain in a region where missiles travel quickly, supply lines are vulnerable, and escalation can outrun planning.

That is one reason the current acute phase is likely to move toward reduced intensity rather than unlimited expansion. The war has been widening geographically, and that expansion increases its economic consequences. Markets are reacting less to battlefield communiqués than to the possibility of systemic disruption. Brent crude has climbed sharply amid fears linked to the Strait of Hormuz, and the nearer prices move toward the psychologically explosive threshold of \$120, the more political panic spreads through trading floors and ministries alike. This is not only about energy inflation. It is about shipping insurance, industrial costs, supply expectations, and the possibility that a regional war begins to impose global recessionary pressure. Reuters reporting has also pointed to plans for maritime protection after the conflict eases, which underscores how seriously the Hormuz risk is being taken.

There is a military logic here as well. The US, for all its reach, does not possess infinite theater resources. High-intensity operations consume munitions, strain regional basing,

complicate air defense, and expose US personnel and infrastructure to retaliation. Washington can hit very hard, but it cannot do everything everywhere for as long as its rhetoric sometimes implies. Once the map of engagement expands and the economic fallout intensifies, the operational window for a sharply escalatory phase tends to narrow. On that basis, the rough outer limit of three weeks for this current spike in violence appears more logical than fantasies of an open-ended campaign conducted at manageable cost. Even Trump's own remarks have oscillated between belligerence and hints that the war is finite, which is often a sign that the White House understands more constraints than it admits in public.

In this context, Moscow is already trying to position itself as a mediator. The Kremlin's public record confirms recent contacts with both Tehran and Washington, while Russian commentary has emphasized de-escalation and a political settlement. Vladimir Putin spoke with Masoud Pezeshkian on March 6, then held a call with Trump on March 9 as tensions continued to rise. Significantly, a second telephone conversation between Putin and Pezeshkian took place on March 10, immediately after the Trump-Putin exchange, which reinforced the impression that Moscow was actively shuttling messages between the two sides and seeking to shape the terms of a possible pause in hostilities. It would still be too strong to say with certainty that Washington sent a fully formed endgame proposal through Moscow, because that specific claim remains interpretive rather than formally documented. But it is entirely plausible that the Kremlin has become one of the channels through which signals about limits, off-ramps, and face-saving formulas are being conveyed. Great powers do this even while they trade threats. Indeed, they especially do it then.

Still, none of this should be mistaken for the end of the confrontation. A de-escalation in the coming days or weeks would not mean that the US-Israeli struggle with Iran has been resolved. It would mean only that one round has culminated and that all participants are recalculating. The deeper conflict remains intact because its causes remain intact. For the US, this war is about more than Iran itself. It is about preserving a global hegemonic position that is visibly under pressure. For Israel, it is about preserving regional primacy in an environment where rivals are more networked, more armed, and less intimidated than before. For Iran, it is about survival, sovereignty, and the refusal to accept strategic subordination. These agendas cannot be reconciled by one ceasefire or one diplomatic communiqué.

That is why the present war feels like part of a larger movement toward the destruction of

the old order. The international system that emerged after the Cold War is no longer coherent enough to absorb repeated shocks without mutating. Every new escalation exposes the fragility of institutions that once claimed universal authority. Every sanction regime, every unilateral strike, every emergency summit, every rhetorical invocation of rules that are not applied equally pushes more states toward the conclusion that the world they were told to trust has already ended in practice. The war against Iran is therefore not a side story. It is one of the places where the struggle over the next international order is being fought in plain sight.

Yet if Iran has managed to endure this round, endurance alone will not be enough for what comes next. Tehran cannot rely indefinitely on sacred memory and wartime solidarity to solve structural weaknesses. It needs reforms that deepen social loyalty rather than merely demand it. It needs a more credible economic strategy, sharper institutional discipline, and continued military adaptation. It must strengthen the bond between state and society not only through the language of resistance, but through competence. A nation can survive on sacrifice for a long time, but not forever. If the leadership believes that surviving this round is itself a sufficient achievement, it will be storing up greater dangers for the next one.

And there will be a next one. Trump may step back tactically, especially if costs mount ahead of the US midterms in November 2026, but that does not mean he has abandoned the strategic impulse behind the war. Current reporting shows no philosophical moderation in Washington, only the familiar oscillation between coercion and calculation. The logic of renewed confrontation remains embedded in the political aims of both the US and Israel. This is why the present phase should be understood not as a finale but as an interval. Iran has not broken. The US has not imposed a decisive settlement. Israel has not secured strategic closure. What we have seen is another brutal round in a longer contest whose stakes now extend far beyond the Middle East.

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