

Iran after three weeks of war: a paradoxical advantage in a war of attrition

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Since 28 February, the United States and Israel have been carrying out attacks on Iran with the aim of neutralising its military capabilities and triggering the collapse of its political system. Although the two allies enjoy clear military superiority and Iran has suffered significant military and political losses, none of the operation's stated objectives have been achieved so far. Weakened and fighting for survival, Iran has imposed an asymmetric conflict on the United States by conducting regular attacks on targets in the Gulf states, including energy infrastructure, and by blocking the Strait of Hormuz. These actions have destabilised the region and global energy markets, generating pressure on the US. Paradoxically, the initiative in the conflict, at least temporarily, has passed to Iran and its capitulation appears unlikely. Under current conditions, with all sides more inclined to escalate than to de-escalate, the prospects for quickly restoring lasting stability in the region appear remote.

The US-Israeli war against Iran

The attack on Iran marks an intensification of decades-long hostility, most recently manifested in the Twelve-Day War in June 2025 and in mass protests in Iran last January, which were politically backed by the United States and Israel and violently suppressed by the regime. The objectives of the current operation are to destroy Iran's military capabilities, primarily its ballistic and nuclear programmes; to eliminate the influence of pro-Iranian armed groups in the region; and to effect regime change. With regard to the last of these, Washington has explored several possible outcomes, including a revolution, a coup, or Iran's capitulation, while seeking to stabilise the situation as quickly as possible once its objectives have been achieved. The aim of Israel, by contrast, is to precipitate the complete collapse of the Iranian system and to durably weaken Iran as a state.

The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, was intended to help achieve the operation's objectives more rapidly. During the ongoing campaign, more than 40 senior Iranian commanders and political figures have already been eliminated, including Ali Larijani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and *de facto* the most influential politician in the country, who was killed in a strike on 17 March. Iranians have also been encouraged to stage protests. Facilities linked to internal security forces have been systematically targeted, including barracks, bases and checkpoints of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij militia. Moreover, there have been attempts

to mobilise armed Kurdish opposition groups based in Iraq and, presumably, other ethnic minorities, which have not materialised so far.

US and Israeli forces have continued to target Iranian military assets, including air defence systems, naval forces, command-and-control systems, launchers and stockpiles of aerial attack assets (missiles and drones), and industrial facilities. There have also been occasional strikes on critical infrastructure, including desalination plants, fuel depots, and banks. Over time, the attacks have expanded to include Iran's energy infrastructure, notably the South Pars gas field, the world's largest natural gas deposit, which was bombed by Israel on 18 March. The conflict has caused civilian casualties (approximately 1,400 killed) and displaced up to 3.2 million people internally, but, unlike in Gaza, military actions have not followed a systematic or deliberate pattern. In parallel, pro-Iranian forces have been targeted across the region, most notably through Israel's offensive against Hezbollah.

The US-Israeli air campaign against Iran is the largest operation of its kind since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The two countries have carried out more than 14,000 strikes at a consistently high level of intensity, with their effectiveness enhanced by the advanced technology of the systems employed. According to statements from Washington, a similar level of intensity may be maintained in the coming weeks.

Iran's struggle for survival

For Iran, the current conflict is a war for the survival of its political system and ruling elites. The scope of its sovereignty and its territorial integrity are also at stake. At the end of the third week of the war, Iran's situation remains difficult, but its adversaries have yet to achieve any of their stated objectives.

In military terms, the United States and Israel possess overwhelming superiority. Iran is unable to secure its own territory, but it can still impose costs on its adversaries. Iran's command structure is gradually disintegrating, while its logistical base is shrinking in the absence of any significant external support. At the same time, US-Israeli strikes have substantially reduced Iran's offensive capabilities, but have not eliminated them. Iran has retained its ability to conduct missile and drone strikes, including against US military targets (bases in the region) and Israel. These actions are attracting considerable media coverage and generating costs, primarily for air defence, but they cannot challenge US-Israeli military dominance.

At present, ensuring the regime's survival and projecting its cohesion are of fundamental importance. The succession process for the supreme leader formally proceeded smoothly, with Mojtaba Khamenei, the son and long-time associate of his predecessor, assuming the position. This pattern also extends to other military and civilian posts. As the conflict develops, IRGC-linked figures representing an older, more hardline generation, are clearly strengthening their position within the regime. As a result, Iran's stance is hardening, while the clerical establishment and moderate politicians, including the president and other government officials, are being marginalised. Given the opacity of the Iranian system, it is impossible to verify reports of frictions within the elite or to assess the true extent of systemic disintegration. For example, Mojtaba Khamenei has reportedly been excluded from decision-making, partly due to injuries sustained in the attacks. If the current dynamics

persist, Iran is likely to sustain further losses and face the gradual erosion of its political system. However, a rapid and complete collapse leading to capitulation appears unlikely.

Although the socio-political situation in pre-war Iran was extremely tense and the conflict will inevitably exacerbate numerous economic and social problems, the country has seen neither mass protests nor the emergence of any significant political or armed opposition during the first weeks of the war. This reflects a combination of factors: the scale of repression following the January protests (at least 7,000 killed and more than 50,000 arrested), explicit threats of further crackdowns, including the current wave of arrests (over 500 individuals), tightened security measures, and the mobilisation of regime supporters. Other important factors include a rise in patriotic sentiment, fears of state collapse, and a tendency to wait for a more opportune moment to act. This is the main reason for the absence of Kurdish activity, alongside missile attacks on bases and pressure exerted on the Iraqi government.

An asymmetric strategic offensive

Although in strictly military terms, the Iranian regime remains firmly on the defensive, and on the domestic political front it is effectively fighting for survival, it has been able to impose an asymmetric dimension on the regional conflict with the United States – one in which it is the dominant actor for the time being, largely owing to the defensive posture of the Gulf states. The key theatre of the Iranian offensive, conducted through relatively low-intensity missile and drone strikes, is the Gulf states themselves, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, although sporadic attacks have also targeted Cyprus – more precisely, British Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia (a British Overseas Territory) – as well as Jordan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, including US bases, military facilities, bases of Iranian Kurdish groups, airports, and port and extraction infrastructure. This dimension of the conflict is escalating rapidly. Iran has also carried out several attacks on vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz and issued repeated threats, effectively closing this vital route. Similarly, Iranian strikes on energy infrastructure covering extraction, processing, and transport have disrupted production, which is likely to have long-term consequences for both regional states and the global economy. Responses from the Gulf states to Iranian actions have been reactive and defensive, largely reflecting fears of escalation and of being perceived as aligning with Israel. US efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz have to date proved ineffective. The process of degrading Iran's military capabilities is time-consuming and uncertain, as are the plans under discussion to organise convoys assisted by US or allied forces.

Iran's offensive actions have pursued several objectives. In the short term, they were intended to deter US allies and partners from joining the attacks and, in the case of Iraq, to compel its government to restrain military actions by Iranian Kurdish groups. These efforts have proved effective, as no country has joined the conflict despite their negative attitude towards the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran is seeking to generate pressure on the United States to bring its military operation to an end. It expects such pressure to be exerted by the Gulf states, whose interests, security, and internal stability – including the economic model they have been building for years – have come under direct threat. More broadly, Iran is aiming to provoke a crisis in global energy

markets that would rapidly spill over into other sectors of the global economy. Faced with this prospect, countries in South and East Asia, as well as Europe have increased pressure on the Trump administration, which has also come under domestic criticism. Over time, Iran introduced unilateral permissions for vessels from friendly countries to transit the Strait of Hormuz, thereby effectively taking control of the passage.

As a result, Iran has developed a powerful instrument for exerting pressure on both regional states and the United States, emerging, at least for now, as a force effectively shaping the security of the Gulf region and global energy markets. At the rhetorical level, Iran is seeking to discredit the United States as a guarantor of regional security and to redefine the regional order, making any normalisation of the situation conditional, in particular on the removal of US bases from the region.

No prospects for a quick resolution

After nearly three weeks of war – a very short period for this type of conflict – the situation remains dynamic and ambiguous. The optimistic scenarios envisaged by the US and Israel have not materialised. Iran has avoided the collapse of its political system, thereby foreclosing the possibility of a swift and peaceful transition of power. Despite limited and diminishing resources, it has retained the capacity to conduct offensive operations and, crucially, has developed instruments that enable it to exert a decisive influence on the regional security environment.

The United States and Israel have retained their military dominance and tactical initiative. They have also maintained their instruments of influence over the situation inside Iran, both at the level of the general population and the elites, including the capacity to eliminate members of the latter. Accordingly, the scenario of marginalising military threats from Iran and causing the regime to disintegrate still appears plausible – but the rapid stabilisation of the country and the region no longer does.

In strategic terms, reopening the shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz and ensuring the security of energy assets in the region will be of critical importance. Pursuing these objectives by military means – such as organising convoys, destroying Iranian missile and drone launchers, and potentially conducting limited ground operations in Iran – does not guarantee immediate success, as this would require strengthening US credibility in the Gulf states and global markets, as well as increasing the willingness of regional actors and markets to accept a higher level of risk.

Given the need to break the deadlock, Washington is likely to intensify its search for solutions. Iran finds itself in a more favourable position, as it can continue its current policy relatively easily and is more resilient to time pressure and external factors. Israel, in turn, stands to benefit from further escalation of the crisis. Expanding its scope – as illustrated by Israel's strike on the South Pars field, followed by Iran's retaliatory actions – intensifies and entrenches the conflict, while helping to weaken Iran and the Gulf states in the long term.

At this stage, a political resolution of the war appears highly unlikely. Key obstacles include the profound lack of trust between the parties, the high stakes of the confrontation between Iran and the United States (including the regional and global order) and the absence of any

prospect of agreement between Iran and Israel. No unilateral move by Washington – such as withdrawing from the war after declaring that the operation’s objectives have been achieved – would offer any prospect of freezing the conflict between Israel and Iran, nor would it automatically halt Iran’s actions against the Gulf states.