



THE US-ISRAEL-IRAN WAR AND THE FEAR OF PROTRACTION

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Abstract

Since the beginning of Operation Epic Fury, war has escalated immensely, and caused vast damage to Iran while significant damage inside Israel, and the US military bases in the Gulf. The war in which US President, Donald Trump, was hoping for a quick victory, is now a thorn in his side. Decisive victory for the US-Israel alliance seems a far cry as the Iranians have put up a strong fight, and showed exemplary determination to continue fighting the war. Washington anticipated a regime collapse after the decapitation of the Iranian leadership. The groundswell of peoples' support after the assassination of the Iranian supreme leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, changed the whole dynamics. This was a tactical setup for the US and Israel's foreign policymakers. The support of its citizens has strengthened Iranians' resolve in defending their honour, security, and territorial sovereignty, which is why they are not ready for ceasefire despite the massive destruction the country has seen since February 28, 2026. President Trump is linking ceasefire to a complete surrender of Iran, and therefore, dilution of Iran's military capabilities. These diametrically opposite interests obstruct the possibility of a ceasefire. While Israel also wants a weakened Iran as the country poses existential threat to the Israelis. Given the demands of each party in conflict, an end to the war is not in sight. Further escalation of the war is very much a possibility. This eventually raises apprehension of war protraction. This issue brief seeks to understand the trajectory of the US-Israel and Iran war, the possible US's exit strategies, and the conditions that may make this war protracted.

Keywords: *International Conflict, Conflict Stalemate, Protracted Conflict, US-Iran Conflict, Peacemaking.*

Introduction

Since the start of Operation Epic Fury, war has escalated immensely, and caused vast damage to Iran while significant damage inside Israel, and the US military bases in the Gulf. The war in which US President, Donald Trump, was hoping for a quick victory, is now a thorn in his side. Decisive victory for the US-Israel alliance seems a far cry as the Iranians have put up a strong fight, and showed exemplary determination to continue fighting the war. Instead of exploring the possibility of pacific resolution of the issues in dispute, the US along with Israel chose to go to war with Iran. Even when countries have the alternative to resolve the conflicts constructively to get the best out of it, Morton is intrigued by the choice that leads countries to a destructive path (Morton, 1973). Galtung is a eternal supporter of 'peace by peaceful means.' For him, addressing the core in war and engaging in a meaningful dialogue with the adversary are key to resolving conflicts in a peaceful manner Galtung, 1996). Kreisberg, the renowned sociologist, echoes Galtung's sentiments and favours mutually acceptable outcome that is arrived at with minimal violence, if not none (Kreisberg, 2015).

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the war is not in sight. Further escalation of the war is very much a possibility. This eventually raises apprehension of war protraction. Is the West Asian region heading for another protracted war? Is the world bracing up for another unending war like the Russia-Ukraine war? This issue brief seeks to understand the trajectory of the US-Israel and Iran war, the possible US's exit strategies, and the conditions that may make this war protracted.

The Middle East is on the boil for over a month. On February 28, 2026, Israel and the United States started an undeclared war against Iran much to the surprise of most of us on the planet. While the indirect talks mediated by Oman's Foreign Minister, Sayyid Badr Albusaidi, was still going on when the US-Israel combine chose to bombard Iran with missiles. In a well-coordinated target-specific bombardment, they succeeded in the decapitation of Iran's top leadership including the assassination of the supreme leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei on the first day itself. This was quite unprecedented as the nation's top leader has been targeted and killed even before the formal announcement of war. Codenamed Operation Epic Fury, the war in which President Donald Trump had hoped for a quick victory, continues unabated with the opening up of multiple battlefronts in the Middle East. After the start, the war quickly spread to Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Lebanon. Iran immediately responded to initial aerial bombings by targeting the US bases in the Gulf, and shooting missiles in Israel. After a month of active warfare, let's take a snapshot of what the belligerents, the US and Israel in this case, and Iran want, and understand whether this war is heading to becoming a protracted armed conflict. What would be the possible exit strategy for the US, and how would Iran be satiated by the outcome of the war? The answer to these and some other questions will be explored in the rest of this issue brief.

What Israel Wants?

Israel has a deep-seated interest in continuing war with Iran. Regime change is not as important a goal as the destruction of Iran. So, the question is what kind of destruction of Iran that Israel aims for? This can be understood in two ways. One is that Israel seeks destruction of Iran to the extent that it ceases to exist as a strong state very much akin to what is Syria today. Syria as a state has been devastated by years of civil war. Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the country is in the transition phase under a provisional government led by Ahmad al-Sharaa of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). With fragmented control, Syria is further descending into chaos due to ongoing sectarian violence, economic devastation, and sporadic Israeli strikes. Second, Israel at least wants Iran's military capability severely damaged.

Israel's intentions are crystal clear: it does not want a strong state in its vicinity, and more importantly, one that poses a serious military threat. After the first strike, a jubilant Netanyahu let loose his emotions by saying that he dreamt of this day for the last forty years. For Israel, Iran is the real threat because of its superior military strength in comparison to other West Asian / Middle Eastern states. Israel's apprehension is also rooted in the fact that Iran has been vocal for the Palestinian cause, and have openly threatened Israel of dire consequences on multiple occasions. Given Iran's military prowess, Israel's fear is not baseless. Israel, therefore, is not satisfied with the way the war has panned out even if it, along with the US, has inflicted immense damage on Iran.

Initially, Israel and the US were confident of a quick victory by decapitating Iran's leadership. Prime Minister Netanyahu somehow persuaded President Trump that decapitation would trigger a widespread unrest against the current regime, which will put Iran in a vulnerable spot as they would be dealing with two battlefronts: one internally and the other against their combined might. In such a



scenario, the Iranians would be left with no choice but to surrender to evade widespread destruction. The calculation went terribly wrong for Netanyahu and Trump. The Iranians hit back hard much to the surprise of the war strategists in Israel and the US. Another likely misjudgement in going for war against was that the United States didn't factor in the threat to its bases in the Gulf, and perhaps didn't expect such a tactical response from Iran. The US's vulnerability became conspicuously visible just a few days into the war.

The US Interest

Political analysts are befuddled to discern the US's decision to join Israel in attacking Iran. In a recent interview given to Prof. Glenn Diesen, John Mearsheimer, one of the world's leading international relations scholars, heavily criticized the USA's decision to attack Iran. Mearsheimer wonders what interests are being served for the US in the war against Iran. But during the interview he quips that whenever the interests of the US and Israel go in opposite directions, the US almost always concedes to Israel's demands. This seems to be the case for the US to join Operation Epic Fury.

Unlike Afghanistan and Iraq, this is not the US's war to fight. The US was drawn into this ugly war by Israel by presenting a cocktail of a possible nuclear programme, and consequently, drawing their attention to the perennial existential threat from Iran. War has its own unique characteristic of panning out beyond human control most often than not (Brown & Rosecrans, 1999). The Israeli top leadership astutely coaxed the US in believing that dislodging the regime is necessary to nullify the looming threat from Iran. They anticipated a short, decisive war but didn't expect such a response from Iran. Just like the recent adventure in Venezuela, Trump got emboldened that he can achieve a similar quick victory in Iran. But since the first strike on February 28, nothing went as per Trump's wishes – no internal unrest in Iran and no widespread resentment against the regime despite decapitation. Rather the assassination of the Iranian supreme leader triggered a wellspring of support and an outpouring of public sentiment in favour of the regime. As a consequence, Trump kept shifting goalposts – from curtailment of Iran's nuclear programme to regime change to total collapse of the Islamic Republic regime.

With no exit strategy in sight, the protraction of war has made Trump desperate. This desperation is conspicuously palpable when he, out of nowhere, offered a 15-point peace plan to Iran mediated by Pakistan on March 26 with a caveat – that he would spare striking Iran's energy infrastructure for five days, initially, but later extended the deadline to April 6, 2026. Iran is given a 10-days' time to accept the peace plan or face deadly strikes post expiration of the deadline. Iran has denied any talks and rejected the peace proposal. The deadline is already over and there is no sign of any rapprochement or ceasefire. Both sides have escalated the attacks. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has reportedly downed two F-15 fighter planes. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF), on April 6, has targeted major airports in Tehran including the Mehrabad International Airport and targeted several Iranian fighter jets.

Iran's Stand

Like the United States, Iran wants the war to end soon but not at the cost of capitulating to Washington's demands. That is the reason Iran has not been receptive to the US's signal of ceasefire. Iran is fighting for survival, not defeating the United States, which is out of the question. Its victory lies in prolonging the war and making it extremely unviable for the US to continue. The economic cost of the war is already sending shockwaves across the globe. The Iranian leadership is emboldened by the fact that Iran survived 47 years under sanctions but the world is feeling the heat in just over a



month. What if they stretched it for a few months more and further exacerbated the situation getting worse with each passing day?

Iran has out rightly rejected Trump's 15-point peace plan and served its own conditions to end the war. The intentions are loud and clear: no ceasefire but a permanent end to war and hostility. Iran's stand is premised upon addressing the causes of conflict with Israel / the US. Resolution cannot be achieved until and unless the core issues are addressed (Burton, 1990). Among Iran's five conditions for peace, two stand out: I) a cast-iron guarantee against future attacks and II) recognition of its sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz. These demands collide with the provisions of the US peace plan. The US, and especially Israel, want a toothless Iran that could never pose a threat to Israel in the future. Israelis want an Iranian state which is not self-dependent for its security. But the Iranian leadership knows well that ceding to the demands of the US would tantamount to reducing Iran to a puppet state. That explains their continued resistance despite being badly hit every single day.

Much to the surprise of the war strategists, the Iranian ascended the escalation ladder equally strongly in response to US and Israel's war escalation. For once in recent years, the United States is failing to maintain escalation dominance due to the strong riposte from Iran. Perhaps, Iran had foreseen such a catastrophe, and thereby, had been preparing for it for decades to be able to put up a fight. Perhaps, anticipation of such a catastrophe explains why Iran had been investing heavily in producing low-cost drones and ballistic missiles. The cheap drones along with the cluster munitions, Sejil missiles, Kheiber Shekhan, hypersonic Fattah missiles, and other classes of ballistic missiles are proving too hot to handle by the defences of Israel and other Gulf countries. The economic costs of intercepting the cheap drones fired by Iran are causing grave concerns both in Tel Aviv and Washington: for each USD 5000 drones they are firing \$1-\$2 million interceptor missiles. In some cases, the cost of an interceptor missile goes up to \$4 million.

Economic Consequences of the War

Geography is on Iran's side. That is giving Iran a huge leverage to continue fighting the war imposed on its people notwithstanding the wrecks it is experiencing as a consequence. Iran sustained 900 strikes in the first 12 hours, which resulted in decapitation of its leadership and killing of more than 150 people, mostly school children. Since the start of Operation Epic Fury, Israel has launched around 7,600 strikes in Iran, and the US has launched nearly 5000 missiles using its sophisticated missile system including Tomahawk cruise missiles. The US has sunk more than 50 Iranian vessels since then. The cost of continuing the war, therefore, is huge for the Iranians.

Just a few days after the war started, Iran had made its intentions clear: it will block the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow sea-lane in the Persian Gulf through which 20% of the world's oil and gas is shipped. Despite US's repeated warnings, the Iranians have succeeded in blocking the passage of oil ships through the Strait of Hormuz, and the volume has been reduced to 5%, which is a huge setback for the global energy sector.

Another choke-point in the region is Bab-el-Mandeb Strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden, and further to the Indian Ocean. This 26-30 km wide maritime strait is sandwiched between Yemen and Eritrea / Djibouti. Around 12% of global oil and gas is shipped through this narrow strait. To further its leverage in the region, Iran may consider capturing this sea-lane with the help of Houthis in Yemen. If that happens, nearly 32% of the global oil and gas supply would be disrupted. Anticipation of such an Iranian action is already causing panic in the global market.



When it comes to economy, countries of the South, East and Southeast Asia are the principal sufferers of the dance of war in West Asia. Post the beginning of Operation Epic Fury, the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) in India has declined by 7.4% with no signs of recovery in near future. The Sensex is falling everyday siphoning off crores of investors' money. South Korea's stock market index, KOSPI, was the worst sufferer in the first two days with an 18% decline. In the United States, the story is no less worrying. According to a report by Upstox, by March 28, 2026, the Dow Jones Industrial Average (DJAI) had lost 7.77%, the S&P 500 declined by 7.4%, and the Nasdaq fell by 7.6%. Adding to that the continued market volatility would continue to dent the confidence of investors across the globe.

The energy shock, thus, is threatening to cause deep global economic pain. Even if the war ends today, the damage done to the energy infrastructure in the Gulf including that of Iran would have a cascading effect for months to come. With no end in sight, the war potentially could wreak havoc to the global economy.

Fear of Protraction

At the moment, the war seems poised to continue for an unforeseeable time. The principal reason is the hardening of positions by conflicting parties. There are no signs of abatement although President Trump is making all sorts of unilateral declarations – from ending of war to continuing diplomatic talks to the surrender of the Iranians to victory. Whether such incoherency in statements is a deliberate ploy or simply a lack of statesmanship is for the individuals to comprehend. Nonetheless experts and political commentators are subtly taking a dig at Trump's absurdity. Currently, the war is playing out in a "culture of no compromise", which risks prolongation. Also, the fear of protraction is for the fact that hate underlies this war: Israelis' hate for the Iranians and vice-versa, and US's hate for the type of government in Iran.

Moreover, the demands of the conflicting parties are fundamentally irreconcilable. In *Grasping the Nettle*, Chester Crocker, et al, have argued that when parties have 'more interest in the hot war or cold stalemate than in any known alternative state of being' the chances of protraction further increase. Considering the hardening of positions of Israel-US and Iran, the war is likely to escalate and prolong. Zartman (2005) recommends early action which is the best answer to any protraction. Kreisberg (2005) favours action from conflicting parties even if violence has committed because he believes that only this way issues in conflict can be addressed and resolved or else if left unaddressed, it will deviate towards protraction. Given the stance of the conflicting parties, it is highly unlikely that the war will be resolved any sooner and there is an apprehension of prolongation of war to a long time.

Exit Plan for the US?

President Donald Trump is showing signs of desperation as the war stretched far too long than he hoped for. His initial expectation of a 'swift victory' is history. What the US now is looking for is an exit plan. Let's turn to the possible exit strategies.

President Trump has already served an ultimatum of 10-days on March 26 to Iran to surrender or face the consequences. The deadline has already expired, what would Trump do now? Will Trump target the energy infrastructure in Iran he threatened earlier? That is very much a possibility. Mearsheimer and other international relations experts are warning against such actions as destroying the oil-producing facilities in Iran would further create panic for global oil supply. Any sane advisor to Trump would exhort him not to target the energy infrastructure as it will hasten the impending energy crisis across the globe, and consequently, would jeopardise the chances of global economic recovery.



Landing in such a situation does not even remotely resemble the original goal of dislodging the regime, and installing a pliant government in Iran. Changing the regime would have given US control over the energy supplies from Iran akin to what they did in Venezuela by capturing President Nicolás Maduro: today, the US is allowing private companies to manage oil production in Venezuela. There was a possibility of a similar arrangement in the country had the US succeeded in triggering a regime change in Iran.

The second choice, though implausible at the moment, is nuking Iran. The US can just drop two or three nuclear bombs, and force the Iranian to surrender similar to the surrender of the Japanese during WWII. This seems highly unlikely as of now. But who knows...?

The third and most unlikely scenario is Washington's withdrawal from the war. How can the foreign policymakers in the US decide to just pull out of the war? Will they have the courage to concede that they made a strategic blunder by waging a war against Iran? Wasn't this a gross miscalculation knowing the military capabilities of Iran even though much inferior to that of the United States? For the US decision-makers, rolling back their decision is out of question. They will do everything to justify their act even if that results in further complication of the war. Thus, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's famous cliché, "*it is easier to start a war than to end it*", explains the current scenario.

Conclusion

Iran is neither Iraq nor Afghanistan. The US won every battle in Iraq and Afghanistan but who won the war? Here, they are fighting a much stronger adversary. The US can win a few or most of the battles but who will win the war is an open question. Iran's victory is not 'defeating the United States' but 'not losing the war'. Certainly, it cannot defeat the US militarily though it can inflict significant damage to Israel, but prolonging the war and not caving in to the demands of the US is Iran's victory. Coming to the question of ending war and restoring peace in the region, that remains open-ended. Ceasefire is likely to happen in a situation whereby one side is badly hit while the other is mostly immune from any damage. The side at the receiving end of the war is more likely to accept a ceasefire proposal from the stronger side to avoid further damage. That seems to be not the case in this war. Iran, despite the daily destruction it is enduring, is also causing damage to Israel and the US military bases in the Gulf. Iran sees ceasefire as its defeat. It knows that negotiations leave little scope for any significant gain as they are already under sanctions for several decades. That is the reason Iran wants a 'definitive end' to the war.

The demands Washington put forward to Iran via Pakistan and the conditions laid down by Iran have structural gaps. These demands do not overlap. In other words, they are not finding any common ground, a situation considered essential for compromise, and consequently, for peace. Washington is appending the peace proposal to near obliteration of Iran's military capabilities whilst Iran is linking a ceasefire to its security, sovereignty, and damage reparations. With neither of the conflicting parties willing to cede an inch of their position, the region seems poised to brace for further escalation and possibly, protraction of the war.

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